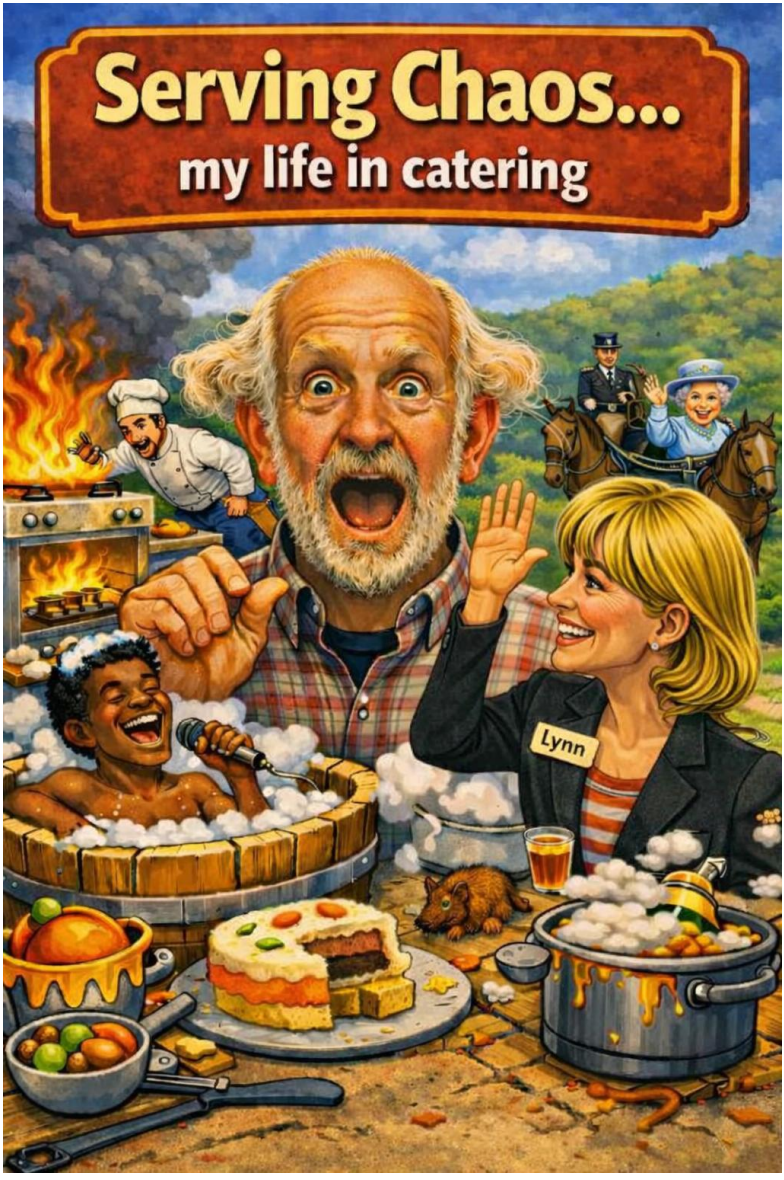
“Serving Chaos: My Life in Catering”



SERVING CHAOS *Fifty Years of Chaos, Cock-Ups & Canapés*

By Ralph

“Serving Chaos: My Life in Catering”

Acknowledgements

I’ve seen books where the acknowledgements section is longer than the book itself — a sprawling epic of gratitude that reads like the author is desperately trying to avoid being hunted down by forgotten acquaintances. And inevitably, the moment the book is printed, they remember the one person who absolutely should have been included. Cue guilt, panic, and a lifetime of awkward Christmas cards.

To avoid such melodrama, I’ve chosen a more streamlined approach: I shall offend everyone equally by not mentioning any of you.

Except, of course, for Lynn — my wife, my editor, my conscience, my in-house quality-control department, and the woman whose single raised eyebrow has the power to rewrite entire chapters. She remains, eternally and unquestionably, She Who Must Be Obeyed.

And then there is my mysterious Turkish companion — Yapay Zekâ — because without this particular guiding glow, half this book would still be in a folder labelled *Maybe Later*. I couldn’t possibly comment.

If I’ve forgotten anyone else, please assume you were placed — with great affection — into the “offended equally” category. It’s the only fair system I’ve ever invented.

FOREWORD

If you’ve ever worked in hospitality, you’ll know that no two days are the same. In fact, some days feel like they’ve been written by a slightly unhinged playwright with a fondness for slapstick, fire hazards, and unexpected nudity.

Ralph has lived those days and many of these anecdotes happened along the way

For over fifty years he has fed the British public — willingly, reluctantly, heroically, and occasionally while sprinting up twelve flights of stairs with a gas cylinder under one arm. He has served royalty, rock stars, schoolchildren, drag queens, bankers, barristers, and the odd tortoise with romantic ambitions. He has cooked on rooftops, in graveyards, on boats, in penthouses, in church halls, and once in a kitchen so small he had to step outside to turn around.

What makes this book special isn’t just the chaos — though there’s plenty of that — but the heart behind it. Ralph tells his stories with warmth, wit, and the kind of self-deprecating honesty that only comes from someone who has truly seen it all and lived to laugh about it.

This isn’t just a memoir of catering. It’s a celebration of people, places, disasters, triumphs, and the strange joy of carrying on even when the trestle table is melting.

So, settle in. Pour yourself a drink. And prepare to meet a man who has spent a lifetime proving that no matter what goes wrong — and it will — there’s always a way to make it work.

And if not… well, at least it’ll make a good story

IMPORTANT:…HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

(A Helpful Guide for the Easily Distracted, the Mildly Confused, and Anyone Who’s Ever Worked in Hospitality)

Congratulations — you’ve picked up a book about catering. Don’t panic. It’s not a cookbook, there are no recipes, and at no point will you be asked to flambé anything.

This is simply a collection of true stories from a man who has spent half a century feeding the British public while wondering why he didn’t take up something sensible, like lion taming.

To get the most out of this book, please follow these simple guidelines:

1. Read with snacks nearby - preferably something that doesn’t require reheating, carving, or explaining. Catering is hungry work — reading about it can be too.

2. Pace yourself

This book contains:

- chaos
- calamity
- nudity (accidental)
- fire (also accidental)
- and the occasional moment of competence

Take breaks.

Hydrate.

Stretch. You’ll need your strength.

3. Don’t try to learn anything useful

If you’re looking for professional catering advice, you’ve come to the wrong place. If you’re looking for stories about melted trestles, misbehaving guests, and the day a tortoise fell in love with a big toe, you’re in exactly the right spot.

4. Read in any order you like

Front to back, back to front, or randomly like a buffet where you start with dessert.

Each chapter stands alone — much like many of the guests I’ve served.

5. Laugh freely…especially at my expense. I’ve already lived through the embarrassment — you may as well enjoy it.

6. If you’ve ever worked in hospitality… you have my deepest sympathy.

This book may trigger flashbacks. Read responsibly.

7. If you haven’t worked in hospitality…prepare to learn why those who have, walk with a slight limp and stare into the middle distance when someone says “It’ll only take a minute.”

8. Above all — relax

This book is meant to be fun. A light stroll through over fifty years of chaos, characters, cock-ups, and the occasional triumph.

If you finish it smiling, I’ve done my job. If you finish it thinking, “Good grief, how is this man still alive,” then I’ve done it perfectly

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⭐ “**The Mixed Wedding”**

Serving Chaos — The Wedding That Shouldn’t Have Happened

It all began, as many questionable life choices do, with a wedding. Not just any wedding — a *mixed* one. Not mixed in the modern sense of cultures or religions, but mixed in the sense that half the guests were determined to enjoy themselves and the other half were determined to prevent it.

The ceremony at the registry office was mercifully brief, and now the assembled guests were seated in a rather seedy church hall tucked between a dry cleaner and a betting shop in North London. As a caterer, I’d seen behind the scenes of many events — and believe me, no two are ever alike.

From the first tentative inquiry to the final acceptance of your quote, catering is a minefield. The unexploded device is usually *Dad*, who’s about to be presented with a bill that exceeds his wildest nightmares. He sits there, smiling through gritted teeth, while his daughter squeals with delight over book matches in Boston Silver and profiterole towers festooned with spun sugar.

But this particular wedding was different — spectacularly so. In catering jargon, “mixed” can mean colour, culture, age, or religion. This one was the latter, and the tension could have been sliced and served with gravy. The groom’s family were refined and whispery; the bride’s were loud, cheerful, and had clearly pre-loaded before the ceremony. The groom’s mother, a well-meaning but formidable woman, was footing the bill and made no secret of her disapproval. I, in my role as Father Confessor, listened politely and said nothing — which was, frankly, the safest option.Rumours began to circulate among my staff that one of the “happy couple” was rather the worse for wear. When the newlyweds finally appeared, walking past piles of jumble covered with a brocade cloth, it became clear the rumours were true. The bride could barely stand — a case of Johnny Walker rather than wedding nerves. The groom’s family looked mortified; the bride’s looked delighted. The opposing teams glared across the badminton court lines that served as aisle markers.

The meal began in uneasy silence. The bride, heavily pregnant and now hysterically drunk, was being serenaded by her new mother-in-law’s running commentary: “She’s not good enough for my son!” — repeated with the rhythm of a metronome. My staff looked at me for guidance. I told them to carry on; partly out of professionalism, partly because I hadn’t been paid yet.

Then came the fireworks. A resounding smack echoed from the top table, followed by the groom dragging his bride out of the hall. The guests, blissfully unaware thanks to their own alcohol intake, continued eating. Others toyed with their cutlery in embarrassed silence. Eventually, the couple returned, and the meal resumed — until the bride, pushed beyond endurance, launched her plate skyward. My manageress, , Helen, bless her, caught it mid-air like a circus performer, followed by a left-handed

snatch of cutlery and cruets. Nothing hit the floor except the uneaten meal, which

landed squarely on the mother-in-law’s dress.

A spontaneous cheer went up — possibly from me — relieved that my china had survived. Moments later came another smack, another exit, and the sound of speeches being quietly stuffed back into suit pockets, never to be heard again.

Amazingly, we did get paid — possibly out of sheer embarrassment. Even the couple’s untouched meals were included in the total. And once again, I found myself wondering: *What on earth am I doing here?*

Little did I know this wedding would be the warm-up act for a lifetime of culinary chaos, misadventure, and enough anecdotes to fill a book.

Which, as it happens, is exactly what you’re holding

⭐ **The Sandwich Course — or, How I Was Toasted Before I Began**

I entered the glamorous world of hospitality via the back door — namely, a four-year National Diploma in Hospitality Management. It was what they called a ‘Sandwich Course’. Cue endless jokes from friends asking if I’d graduate to ‘Buttered Toast’. I smiled politely and pretended their observation was original…. It never was.

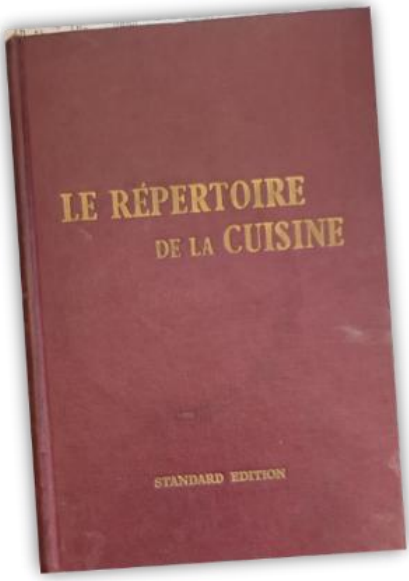
The course involved seven months in college each year followed by five months in the industry:

- Year one as a commis chef
- Year two as a commis waiter
- Year three as a barman
- Year four as a front-office receptionist

It was a clever system — alternating between theory and practice — though “practice” often meant discovering how many ways a chef could shout your name before lunchtime.

The first session at college opened a whole new world. We were young, eager, and blissfully unaware of what awaited us. We learned French culinary terms we couldn’t pronounce, the hierarchy of the kitchen (which resembled a medieval court), menu planning, garnishes, bookkeeping, economics, law, and hotel maintenance. But this wasn’t a careers lecture — it’s survival training.

Armed with our new knowledge and the confidence of people who didn’t yet know better, we marched off to our West End hotel placements determined to teach the riffraff how things should be done. We knew it all. Escoffier/Le Repertoire de La cuisine was our bible.



And then came reality.

My grand introduction to the “hospitality industry” — a phrase that suggests warmth, comfort, and smiling staff — turned out to be a baptism of fire, steam, shouting, and the unmistakable smell of overcooked liver. I was a commis chef, which is French for “the one who gets blamed for everything.”

⭐ **“How Not to Survive a Hotel Kitchen”**

If anyone ever tells you that hotel work is glamorous, send them straight to the back of house. Preferably during breakfast service. Preferably when the chef is in a mood. Preferably when someone has just dropped a tray of kidneys.

“Serving Chaos: My Life in Catering”

Baptism of Fire .. or, My First Descent Into the Underworld (Aka.. “The Kitchen”)

We left college armed with confidence, French terminology, and the belief that we were the future of British catering. We knew every garnish, every classical sauce, every correct method. Wow, were we in for a rude awakening.

For one thing, to educate others you must be able to communicate — and not a single soul in the bowels of the earth (also known as the kitchen) spoke a word of English. The temperature was jungle-like and air conditioning was something only seen in American films. The entire brigade operated in French, shouted at a volume that suggested they were addressing troops on a battlefield. Orders from the *** Hotel restaurant upstairs arrived via a pneumatic tube system, shooting down to us minions below like messages from Mount Hotel restaurant upstairs arrived via a Mount Olympus.

It took me about ten minutes to realise that instead of teaching the catering world, I had a *lot* of learning to do myself. In fact, the quicker I temporarily forgot everything college had taught me, the better my chances of survival.

⭐ Mr L**, the Apron With Legs — and Other Lessons From the Underworld

Among the many characters inhabiting the kitchen underworld, none was more unforgettable than Mr L**, the diminutive Chinese chef saucier. He was 4’6” of quiet efficiency topped with an apron that reached 4’7”. Anything not nailed down — ladles, herbs, cutlery, the occasional chicken — vanished beneath it with the smoothness of a seasoned stage magician.

But if you were his commis, you ate well. Very well.

Possibly too well.

⭐ **Why Put Up With It?**

People often ask why anyone would tolerate such conditions. Simple: the name of the hotel. A West End *** Hotel on your CV was a golden ticket — a stepping stone

to a proper career. The hotel knew this and took full advantage of the endless supply of cheap, eager labour. If you didn’t like it, there were plenty more waiting in the wings to take your place.

On occasional days I “graduated” to staff cook, though with the ingredients available, I didn’t exactly win hearts or stomachs. My culinary creations were met with the same enthusiasm usually reserved for tax bills.

⭐ **Chefs vs Waiters — The Ancient War**

The traditional hatred between chefs and waiters goes back centuries. Chefs saw themselves as professionals; waiters were, in their eyes, decorative rubbish. A typical scene: A chef chasing a waiter through the revolving doors, brandishing either a knife or a ladle full of spaghetti. It was like watching a low-budget opera — dramatic,

chaotic, and entirely unnecessary.

⭐ **The Plongeur — The Worst Job on Earth**

The plongeur was the wash-up area where enormous pots were cleaned by a rotating cast of imported labour. It was the world’s worst job, and you never saw the same face twice. The smell alone could strip paint.

One day, having burnt a large copper saucepan, I took it down to the plongeur. Turning the corner, I was confronted by a stark-naked gentleman of colour sitting in the wooden sink, up to his neck in bubbly water, possibly having found a new use for Brillo Pads and singing happily in his native tongue. He was having a bath. In the sink. In the wash-up area. I backed away slowly. I stood there, frozen, wondering if this was some sort of initiation ritual. The chef simply stepped past him and barked, “You’re late.”

I learned two things that day:

1. Never assume you’ve seen it all.
2. Never use a Brillo pad again.

⭐ **Initiation Rites — Sadistic, Hilarious, or Both**

Talking of Initiation Rituals I must explain that Kitchen initiations came in many forms. Some were sadistic, some hilarious, and some both. For example, no one sits on the worktops. If you did, the traditional method of removal was to pour boiling water on the bench beneath your backside. You only made that mistake once.

My own initiation came at the end of a long day when the head chef told me to turn off all the ranges for the night. The kitchen was full of ancient equipment, with long banks of ranges all of varying types, including one monstrous long range of cookers that looked like it had been salvaged from a Victorian battleship.

Oddly, the entire brigade, on this particular night, seemed in no hurry to go home. They lounged around, watching me with suspicious interest.

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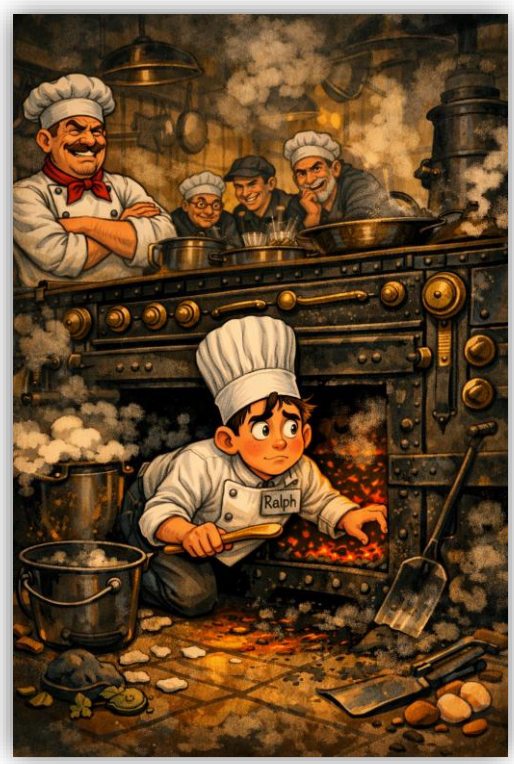
I went down the long line of ranges, turning off gas taps like a dutiful apprentice — until I reached the last aisle - the oldest range there..No taps. None. I searched everywhere. Still nothing.

The laughter began. I refused to be defeated. If they could be turned on, they could be turned off. I went behind the range. Nothing. More laughter.

Then it dawned on me.

These were the old solid-fuel cookers. They had no controls. You controlled the heat by moving the pots around the hot plates and adjusting the rings.

I had fallen for it completely.



The chef’s expression suggested he was reconsidering his entire career. However I had passed my ‘initiation’

“The moment the brigade realised I was stupid enough to try — and stubborn enough not to give up.”

But something changed after that. A perceptible shift. A nod here, a grunt there. I had passed the test.

I was one of them

My youthful imagination had never stretched far enough to picture hell, but the kitchen came close. The heat was unbearable, the noise relentless, and I quickly discovered I was the lowest life form there — marginally above the ever-present cockroaches, though frankly I was convinced that they were more popular with some members of the brigade.

“Serving Chaos: My Life in Catering”

The official staff food was disgusting: leftovers from banquets, scraped together with all the enthusiasm of a man filling potholes. The head chef and sous chef dined at trestle tables (with a table cloth!) that we commis set up for them, eating perfectly respectable meals. The chef de parties also ate separately (also with a cloth) and made sure their plates were excellent. We, meanwhile, ate rubbish (on a bare-topped trestle) — until we got wiser and began organising our own private banquets.

My first kitchen ‘department’ was vegetables. This meant constant sprints to the cold room to fetch salsify or épinards. While there, I stuffed myself with strawberries and anything else edible. The cold room became my sanctuary — a chilled refuge from the heat, the shouting, and the existential dread.

“Serving Chaos: My Life in Catering”

Like every commis, I was screamed at continually: run faster, chop quicker, think smarter, move NOW. If you lacked confidence, this was a make-or-break existence. Quite a few of my college mates never returned after their first taste of catering. It was an initiation by fire — and occasionally by boiling stock.

Arriving early was a trauma of its own. You’d enter the gigantic dark kitchen cautiously, switch on the lights, and you hear a deathly rattle as thousands of cockroaches scattered in every direction, racing for the drainage channels. I still remember trays of croquette potatoes cooling overnight, clearly serving as an all-you-can-eat buffet for these uninvited hotel residents.

This was years ago, of course. Now, with modern hygiene standards, I’m sure there are no cockroaches scampering anymore. They probably just meander back to their daytime shelters, fully satiated and far too old to scamper.

The chef’s favourite pastime was throwing handfuls of them onto the solid-top stove and listening to the crunch as their shells cracked. How any gastronomic delights emerged from this den of filth was a mystery to me — and, I suspect, to the sanitary inspectors (as environmental health officers as they were then called). The only ones I ever saw were sitting in the chef de cuisine’s office, leaving with a parcel that looked suspiciously like a bottle.

My hours were 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., with a four-hour break from 2 to 6. This meant leaving home at 8:30 in the morning rush hour, then spending my break swimming at the YMCA at Tottenham Court Road, playing football, rowing on the Serpentine, or wandering museums and cartoon cinemas if the weather was bad.

I often met Lynn, who worked in The Strand opposite my hotel. She went home. I went back to work. At 6 p.m., I’d fight my way onto a tube packed with people going home — the same people I’d travelled in with that morning. To add insult to injury, I travelled home at night on the last train, surrounded by young couples returning from a night out.

Weekends off? Don’t be ridiculous. This was catering.

And all this for £7.50 a week.

An old photo of my late father (on the left) in the ‘30’s as a commis in The Hotel Continental in Koblenz .

…..and a very similar one of me, (on the right) also as a commis chef in the 60’s- approx. 30 years later complete with filthy aprons standing by the clocking-off clock

⭐ **<u>The Two-Sided Door</u>**

One detail that always stuck with me was the contrast between guest and staff areas. On the guest side the kitchen-to-restaurant door was plush and decorative— and plain, filthy, and covered in ingrained fingerprints on the staff side. A perfect metaphor for hospitality: glamour on one side, chaos on the other.

“Serving Chaos: My Life in Catering”

⭐ BACK TO COLLEGE

It was a welcome relief to return to the zany chaos of student life. By this time quite a few of us had acquired old bangers —cars held together largely by hope — and we headed off in convoy to Skegness. One of our year had parents who owned a small private hotel there, and we descended on the sleepy seaside town like a travelling circus.

The sight of our ancient cavalcade of wheezing Crocs racing each other along the deserted, windswept sea-front was frowned upon by the few brave souls willing to confront Skegness’s notorious icy winds. Personally, I always felt it was marginally better to die young than to end one’s days in a cold English seaside resort out of season.

By now our little crowd of aspiring hoteliers had become firm friends. We swapped stories from our various placements and quickly realised that the glamorous London hotel scene looked very different behind the scenes than it did from the marble-floored lobbies.

Stage two of our training involved another seven months back at college, followed by a further five-month placement in a West End hotel —

⭐ This time not as a commis chef, but as a commis waiter.

I began as a breakfast waiter in a Mayfair hotel popular with tour groups, predominantly American, many of whom arrived with a firm belief in the legendary “full English breakfast.”

They ordered heroic quantities of kidneys, smoked haddock, and prunes, and constantly asked how we managed to eat such enormous breakfasts every day. Having had nothing more than cornflakes and tea myself, I felt unqualified to answer on behalf of the nation. The “full English” is a publicised phenomenon that doesn’t quite match the reality for most people — if indeed it ever did.

Many of the guests stayed several days, and a few would say, "Look after us, son, and we'll see you all right when we leave." Their departures, however, were often sudden and at odd hours, and their generous promises tended to evaporate in the excitement of catching the coach.

Looking back, I suspect many of these visitors were simply enjoying the strength of the dollar at the time and were new to international travel. They were enthusiastic, curious, and occasionally baffled by British customs — and I was equally baffled by theirs. But they were part of the great education that hospitality gives you: a crash course in people, patience, and the art of smiling through anything

⭐ Room Service Surprises

Room service was another adventure. You never knew what you'd find behind a hotel room door. Sometimes it was a businessman in a towel. Sometimes it was a couple who clearly hadn't ordered food for the purpose of eating. Sometimes it was an aircrew who had been drinking since take-off.

One night, I delivered a tray to a room and was greeted by a woman who opened the door wearing nothing but a smile. I froze. She froze. We both pretended nothing unusual was happening. I placed the tray down, said "Enjoy your meal," and fled.

⭐ The Perks of Being a Waiter (Mostly Edible)

One of the few consolations of waiting in a grand hotel was the food. No good meal ever reached the restaurant intact. If a steak looked particularly appetising, the trick was simple: create a dramatic fuss in the kitchen.

"No way can I serve *that* tiny portion to my table!" "This is an insult!" "Do you want the guests to complain?"

After enough theatrical outrage, the chef would reluctantly slap an extra piece onto your service flat just to shut you up. The moment the dish left the kitchen, the "tiny portion" miraculously found its way from the silver flat to your starving stomach.

Any waiter who goes hungry is either unusually honest or tragically lacking in natural flair.

Thanks to a good head waiter — and possibly a shortage of staff — I soon became a station waiter, and I loved the adrenaline surge when things got frantic. I was now seeing the ancient chef–waiter hatred from the other side of the fence. I still earned only £7.50 a week, but at least I was now sharing in the tronc — that archaic system where tips were pooled and distributed according to seniority and ability. I had neither, but the little extra I received was very welcome.

⭐ **The Floors — Where the Real Cushy Numbers Lived**

I was then transferred to the ‘floors’, where I discovered the cushy little empire some waiters had carved out for themselves. Each floor had a tiny pantry run by cheerful Italians, equipped with hot plates and toasters, discreetly tucked away to provide room service.

Breakfast orders came through by phone: toast, eggs, coffee, the usual. Some items were fetched from the still room or kitchen; others were prepared right there in the pantry, covered with silver domes, and rushed to the correct room via the lifts.

The only problem? Everyone wanted breakfast at the same time. The lifts were jammed, the kitchen was bedlam, and once everything was assembled, it became a race against time.

Armed with the passkey, you knocked briefly, shouted “Good morning, breakfast,” and strode into the room with purpose. The sights I saw in those early days made a wiser man of me.

We were supposed to ask, “Would you like me to open the curtains, Sir?” But frequently the “Sir” was otherwise engaged — and breakfast was the last thing on his mind.

As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I was often confronted by a young lady lying on top of the bedclothes, wearing a charming smile and very little else. Strangely, the cutlery began rattling on the tray, and the glass of orange juice developed a life of its own

It slowly dawned on me why my Italian colleagues were sometimes mysteriously slow returning for further orders.

My next placement was in the dispense bar of one of London’s most famous hotels.

The *** Hotel Bar**

The dispense bar was a hive of activity, behind the scenes serving the waiters and it was a very well-equipped bar. The staff running the bar were very professional

and as cocktails were extremely popular with the clientele, we constantly tested one another to get the ingredients and methods correct and the UKBG* was our bible (*United Kingdom Bartenders’ Guild) The waiters whisked the cocktails away to glamorous guests and I had become quite proficient at making cocktails, all of which I've subsequently forgotten.

The dry martinis were made in bulk each morning, heavily iced to satisfy the American desire for freezing-cold drinks. Having notice that about 98% of hotel staff appeared to be alcoholics, I was fascinated to see the attractions of the bar from behind the scenes. Having a large American clientele, the ever-popular dry Martini was the most popular drink and it was required to be both incredibly cold and dry in service. The waiters were constantly swirling ice in the glasses to cool them. The dry martini was made in bulk at the beginning of the day to be able to dispense them as fast as was required. It was well laced with ice. I was assured that the reason was to satisfy the American desire for drinks to be served at freezing points but I was not too green to realise that the truth was that the melted ice diluted the drink thereby increased profitability.

The range of wines was extensive and I had persuaded the cellarmaster to allow me to wander through the far-reaching vaults which stretched for what seemed like miles right under the Thames. The dimly lit tunnels and vaults were eerie and full of atmosphere. There were bottles paid for and left which were cobweb-covered in arched alcoves some still from earlier war years with famous statesman's names on yellow labels. The wines were an encyclopaedia of names, that up to then, I'd only read about and when confronted with the actual article. one handled the bottles with reverence and could imagine how an art historian must feel when handling a genuine Renoir.

As one trod carefully through the cold but dry arches full of racks, one spoke in quiet

whispers, as if in a holy place. Possibly this is where Bachus disported himself when in a more sober meditative frame of mind

⭐ **TheScotch-in-Ginger-Ale Fiddle**

Every department had its fiddles and I was slowly waking up to this. Maybe this is one side of our 'practical experience' that college could not teach us..(I hasten to add..to make us aware of it..NOT to adopt these practises)

The floor waiters often appeared at the bar to replenish their floor pantry stock, and I noticed they always took a few bottles of ginger ale with them after a chat to the head barman. Our college had, as in previous years, negotiated a minimum wage for us which was so low that it presented no deterrent to the hotel in employing us and we likened it to slave labour, even when compared to the existing exceedingly low rates. So, after a few weeks when I was given a few extra pounds by the head barman in a brown envelope and told not to say anything or not to ask questions. I was both delighted, and surprised, and I certainly asked no questions.

Maybe, I realised it was 'hush money' but I was too poor and too inexperienced to rock the boat so I watched to see what was afoot.

As I explained earlier the majority of drinks, especially whiskey, were requested on the rocks and this fact was exploited in earnest in the service of short measures. With the fantastic quantities of Scotch served, this short measure soon was quickly converted into extra bottles of Scotch. In hotel parlance, ***Scotch Currency.*** But with the tight security at staff entrances with bag searches, how was this going to be turned into money? It slowly became apparent that this was in some way connected to the floor waiters and one day it clicked. The small bottles of ginger ale was actually Scotch whisky. By transferring it into the familiar Schweppes bottle, the waiters could openly carry it around the hotel without arising suspicion. It was then transferred back to Scotch bottles on the floors for cash sales for room service. The Schweppes bottles of *ginger ale* had a standard value. This was presumably when I had witnessed the huddle of floor waiters discussing something with the head barman.

Maybe this was when the orders were given Nothing was ever officially mentioned and I certainly never asked.

⭐ The Staff Bar: A Social Experiment Gone Wrong

As explained earlier I was slowly made aware that every department had its own fiddles, but nothing prepared me for the staff bar. It was a vast, featureless room with Formica tables, overflowing ashtrays, and a haze of cigarette smoke thick enough to slice. Staff were strictly segregated by hierarchy. A kitchen porter would never sit with a chef. A chambermaid would never sit with a waiter. It was like a wildlife documentary narrated by David Attenborough.

Beer and minerals were sold at cost price, and the kitchen received a free case of beer daily — “customary and necessary,” they said. I didn’t argue. A sober chef is a rare and dangerous creature. All of us commis had to take a turn at running the Staff Bar and you quickly got used to careful pouring the Worthington to avoid the sediment and avoid the fury of old chambermaids who seemed to be permanent fixtures.

⭐ The Great Staff Bar Stock-Taking Fiddle

The staff bar had its own stock-taking “system.” Bar staff would tick off stock that didn’t exist, ensuring everything balanced on paper while mysteriously evaporating in real life. This continued until, inevitably at some future date, some poor innocent discovered the discrepancy and was blamed for the entire thing.

I learned early on that catering is less about food and more about creative accounting. We were instructed at closing time to take stock. This would have taken an eternity

because it entailed counting stacks and stacks of crates, but I had had the 'nod'..so I, like everyone else, just did a superficial check using the previous figures. Looking closer I saw why. All the lower crates contained empties with the crown tops wedged back on and everyone just added them in as full crates. Apparently, this practise had been going on for an eternity.

The Royal Cocktail Incident*

One day, when I had been elevated to the famous Foyer Bar where an equerry for a dignified royal guest requested a specific cocktail. My UKBG manual was nowhere

to be found. My memory failed me. In a panic, I grabbed several obscure bottles, mixed them with great flair, added lime, borage, and an olive, and sent it off. It was taken to the dignitary and I watched in fear as he sipped it. His face changed.

Had I been tumbled?

The equerry returned and he asked for another. .."phew" I had no idea what I'd put in the first one, so I proceeded to make an impressive show of selecting various

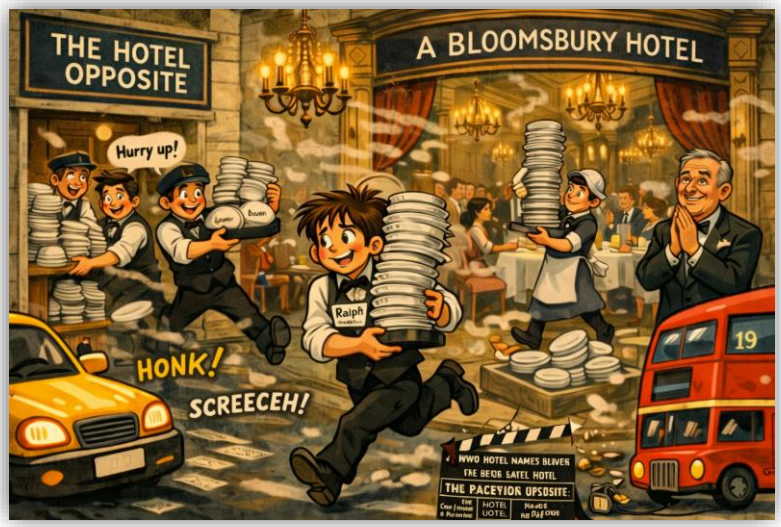
spirits and liqueurs from shelves and fridges aware that every move was being scrutinised.

It was returned to the ‘royal personage’, it was drunk and it was seemingly enjoyed.

⭐ Back to College — Older, Wiser, and Only Slightly More Prepared

Once again I returned to college, certainly more street-wise this time and eager to learn about our final inroad into the mysteries of real hotel life — but now from a more respected position: front-of-house receptionist. I felt far better prepared to face the real world, yet it didn’t take long to discover that my theoretical knowledge was still nowhere near as accurate as it ought to have been.

Possibly our lecturers had never been through what we had. We were learning on our exhausted feet — quite literally — and discovering that the polished textbook version of hotel work bore only a passing resemblance to the reality.



⭐ The Bloomsbury Hotel Banquet Disaster

To earn pocket money, a few of us students worked as casual waiters at a certain Bloomsbury Hotel. The place was run by an ageing manager who believed every young male employee was a gift from the heavens. He was heard to gleefully whisper “ah, fresh meat” as we arrived. We put him right about this mistaken notion very quickly. The banquets were legendary — not for their quality, but for their chaos. No plant check had been done, so we were short of plates, cutlery, and anything else remotely useful. At one point, fifteen waiters could be seen sprinting across a busy

London road to borrow plates from the hotel opposite. The guests never noticed, although they may have wondered why their crockery bore another hotel’s logo.

⭐ **<u>The French Restaurateur & the Eight Cocottes</u>**

As part of our training at college, we were occasionally set competitions. I was the *‘lucky’* one chosen to represent our college. The table was set for leading restaurateurs who, up to then were just famous names to me. I was a bundle of nerves. I collected the pre-ordered starters from the Hotel School kitchen. The maître chef de cuisine presented me with two beautifully garnished smoked trout and a large heavy silver flat with eight earthenware stone cocottes containing hors d’oeuvres varies. He patiently explained the name and contents of each with a sigh that seemed to say “this idiot commis waiter won’t remember a single one, why am I wasting my time!”

I carried the very heavy tray into the restaurant and obviously the ‘guests’ were instructed to see my abilities (or lack of them). I had to patiently describe the various contents and this was repeatedly related to the eight guests who had selected this starter. As if the weight wasn’t taxing enough, my third guest seemed to be hard of hearing so my explanations took even longer.

By the time I had toured the table, perspiration was running down my back and I realised too late why no one else had put themselves forward for this *honour*. I resembled a man trying to balance a tray on a trampoline.

No, we didn’t win The Bradshaw Trophy but came in second. Possibly a reflection on how bad all the other hotel schools were?

The hotel I was placed in next sat just off Oxford Street, right in the heart of London's busy West End. It belonged to a large group, which proved extremely useful later on, as you'll see.

⭐ The Argentine Reception Manager

Front-of-house was no less chaotic. Our Argentine reception manager, Mr R***, was a man of great charm and even greater fury. He could soothe an irate guest with a smile, then turn around and chase us down the corridor for misfiling a registration card - and in those days it was still a 'card'

He taught me the importance of diplomacy — a skill I did not naturally possess. But when you've watched a tired tourist arrive at 2am only to discover their room has been double-booked, you learn to smile, apologise, and pray another hotel in the group had a spare bed. As our hotel was overbooked it was unlikely that availability in other group hotel would be different and sometimes we taxied the tired guests all over London in desperation

Me on reception

Note the state of art Sweda Hotel Front Desk Accounting Machine (College had only taught us manual pen and paper book keeping…..Wow!)

…also note the old-fashioned phone

⭐ Morals and the Hotel Life (A Blurred Area)

Morals in hotel life were… flexible. Put a great mass of young people together in London, add bedrooms, and you had a vast playground of debauchery. We saw it all — the secretaries with rooms conveniently adjacent to the boss, the "late-night meetings", the "urgent paperwork", the whole parade.

But what was *absolutely forbidden* was booking a single room and sneaking someone up to it. Not because anyone considered themselves a guardian of public decency — far from it — but because **occupancy numbers mattered**, and that made it taboo.

This is where the **bush telegraph** came in.

The concierge — a man who, for a modest bribe, could obtain impossible theatre tickets, hire a car at midnight, or probably arrange a small coup — would shout a secret code word across the foyer, accompanied by a discreet nod toward the suspected guest.

Reception would immediately pass the room number to Housekeeping, who, armed with her pass key, would investigate for signs of double occupancy.

Then came the finale.

When the miscreant checked out — always at the busiest possible moment — he would be asked, loudly and with great ceremony:

“Are you settling your account including *double occupancy*, sir?”

A red-faced guest would invariably nod, muttering something like “Oh… yes… forgot…” Justice served, hotel-style.

⭐ The Air Crews

A limited number of rooms were permanently reserved for the air crews of **Sudan Airways** and **Nigeria Airways**, and it was always a pleasure to offer room service there the moment they summoned us.

One lovely lady even bought me a pineapple

To a young male, the sights witnessed were enough to put Sudan and Nigeria firmly at the top of my holiday wish-list.

After months of chaos, exhaustion, and more near-misses than I care to admit, I realised something important: **Hotel work is not for the faint-hearted.**

But it gave me stories, skills, and a sense of humour that would serve me well in the next chapter of my life.

⭐ Back to College (Briefly)

I returned to college for one final session. We worked hard to make up for the lectures missed during parties — especially during Rag Week. A few of us rented a house near the college, which quickly became a permanent party venue. I was lucky not to have to re-sit anything. Four years on and off was quite enough.

COLLGE FOND FAREWELLS

Diploma framed, calling cards printed, ego inflated — I was fully convinced the world was about to welcome me with open arms. The world, however, had other plans. It took one look at me, rolled up its sleeves, and said, "Right then, let's take him down a notch."

And so I marched out to face life… with Lynn beside me. (I had met - and fallen head-first, arms-flailing — for the lovely Lynn, and yes, we tied the knot not long after I left college in 1964. It feels like a lifetime ago… probably because it *was* a lifetime ago.)

We worked hard, we argued harder, and we discovered that catering and newly-married bliss are not natural companions. Yet here we are, more than 60 years later, still bickering like two pensioners fighting over the last custard cream.

But Lynn has stood by me through it all — as chief taster, emergency BBQ chef, van driver, and general keeper-of-my-sanity. So yes… marrying her was a wise decision. (On my part, anyway.)

⭐ The Truth About Qualifications

But the real world soon taught me that qualifications impress only those who already like you. I proudly handed out my new business cards to family members, who examined them as if they were rare works of art

Qualifications impress only the people who already like you.

Experience is what counts and I was about to get plenty of that — whether I wanted it or not.

Little did I know it would involve exploding lager barrels, tortoises in love, and a window that would one day fall out of its frame. But the real world soon taught me valuable lessons.

I took my position very seriously. I wore my suit proudly. I spoke in my best managerial voice. And within a week I discovered the truth Catering is a hands-on job, and the sooner you accept that, the sooner the staff stop laughing at you.

⭐ Pub Life, Pint Pulling & Other Poor Decisions

Attired in my shiny suit, and the sort of confidence only a young man with absolutely no idea what's coming can possess, I stepped into the world of pub-restaurant management. I had chosen not to go into hotels — I'd already survived enough naked men in sinks — and instead I joined Chef & Brewer, a group developing the then-revolutionary "speciality restaurant" concept.

⭐ The Wheatsheaf at Virginia Water

My first posting was The Wheatsheaf, beautifully perched in a Surrey beauty spot. Once a modest 22-room hotel, it had been reborn as a sprawling beast with three restaurants and six bars, each with its own personality disorder.

One bar — the original saloon — had been left completely untouched to keep the locals happy. They were the sort who could tell if a bar stool had been moved an

inch, and who treated any form of redecoration as a personal insult. Another bar was the **vintage-themed one**, complete with old car seats. Very stylish. Very retro. Very uncomfortable.

Then there was the **cellar bar**, tucked into a low-ceilinged original cellar, where barrels of sherry were served in schooners and consumed with alarming enthusiasm.

The restaurants were equally lively. The **Drunken Duck** was a totally new concept

— set-price meals, fast service, and queues stretching out the door.

The **LakeRoom** offered a sensibly priced menu, attractive décor, and views that made people feel they were dining somewhere far more expensive than they actually were. The whole Wheatsheaf experience drew crowds from London, and a full car park was a daily sight.

Afternoon teas were served to visitors who wandered the gardens and admired the lake. We even had a minibus driver who collected our mostly young staff from the surrounding villages. It all felt idyllic… until the lunchtime rush, when the place transformed into a battlefield of scones, jam, and fraying tempers.

“Serving Chaos: My Life in Catering”

One college friend, Arnold, was also managing at The White Hart opposite Windsor Castle which was very close to The Wheatsheaf so we spent many a happy break period enjoying our respective hotel facilities

This was where I learned the **magic art of delegation** — a skill born not from management theory, but from survival.

You see, our alloy barrels of lager arrived after a bumpy ride, and when the Tannoy crackled with **“New barrel to the Lake Room Bar!”** those of us in the know suddenly discovered urgent tasks elsewhere.

The reason was simple: the lively lager, under natural pressure, required the removal of its seal followed by a lightning-fast twist-and-push to attach the new lines. Do it wrong, and you were drenched. Do it right, and you *still* risked being drenched.

I learned this the hard way. Many a suit was sacrificed before I mastered the ancient managerial art of delegating the dangerous jobs to someone who still believed in their own invincibility.

It was also at The Wheatsheaf that I first encountered the revolutionary idea of **set-price meals**: steak, jacket potato, peas, roll, butter, and dessert — all for one price. Radical then. Mundane now. Brilliant for portion control.

⭐ **The Philosophy That Saved Me**

Somewhere in the middle of all this madness, I developed a philosophy that stayed with me for life:

Never ask anyone to do a job you wouldn't do yourself.

It earned me respect. It also meant I ended up doing far more than any sane manager should. But it taught me the dodges, the tricks, the shortcuts — all invaluable in the years to come.

And it all started in a Surrey beauty spot, with sherry in schooners, retro car seats, exploding lager barrels, and a saloon bar where the locals knew if you'd moved a stool.

⭐ **The Fun We Had (But That's Another Story)**

Despite the chaos, the exhaustion, and the occasional desire to run away and join a monastery, we had enormous fun. But those stories — the truly outrageous ones — belong in the next chapter.

Because soon, I would leave pubs behind and step into the world that would define my life:

⭐ **The Night I Took on the Thames — And Lost**

(A Dramatic Interlude in Three Acts)

Act I — Hope, Dreams, and Other Bad Decisions

I was beginning to glimpse my future in this corner of the catering world — and it looked like a long, exhausting montage of late nights, early mornings, and a personal life so thin it could be used as tracing paper. Yes, the work was exhilarating. Yes, the adrenaline was addictive. But unless you were single or worked with your partner, the lifestyle was about as sustainable as a chocolate teapot.

After a heroic stint covering relief management — including a steak-house bar in Hartley Wintney that felt 15 miles further away every day — I was promised a glamorous transfer to a brand-new flagship pub-restaurant at Swiss Cottage. It was going to be modern. It was going to be exciting. It was going to open… eventually.

Renovations dragged on for months, so instead I was dispatched to **The River Room**, a city restaurant perched on the Thames like a slightly confused seagull.

Act II — Enter: The Living Dead

This was my first taste of pub-bar work. Reader, it tasted like regret.

Lunchtimes were perfectly pleasant — busy, buzzy, and full of interesting people. But at 6 p.m. sharp, the **London zombies** emerged. They shuffled in daily, ordered the same drinks, and discussed only one topic with religious devotion: **dog racing**. Not pets. Not training. Not even funny anecdotes. Just racing. Their conversational range made a traffic cone look verbose.

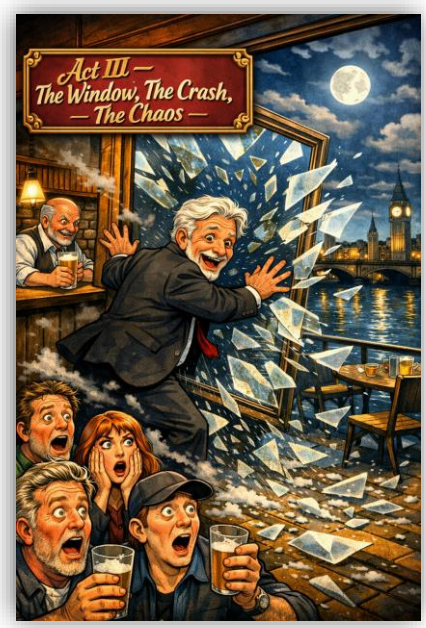
Closing time was the highlight of my day — watching them stagger home to whatever thrilling domestic bliss awaited them.

One evening, the landlord instructed me to open the windows at closing time. “Clears the smoke,” he said. “Clears the clientele,” he added with a wink.

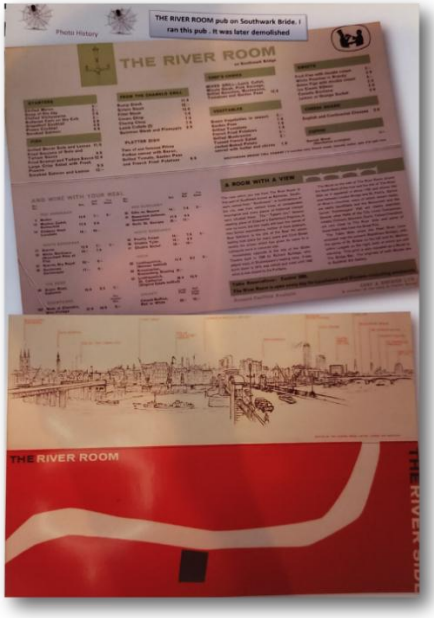
Act III — The Window, The Crash, The Chaos

Fuelled by righteous enthusiasm, I marched to the window, grabbed the frame, and…
…pushed the entire **plate-glass panel** straight out of its housing.

It fell. It crashed. It exploded across the terrace like a budget action-movie stunt.



`The zombies snapped awake, blinking at the sudden Arctic blast and the sound of their evening collapsing — literally — into the Thames. My early night evaporated



instantly. I had to wait for the emergency boarding-up crew while the clientele enjoyed the greatest talking point they'd had in years. I lasted only a short while longer before requesting a transfer……..Urgently.... Desperately. With the passion of a man who had stared into the abyss — and accidentally pushed a window into it.

Menus from the River Room

And so, ladies and gentlemen, I was finally ready to take on the world. And believe me… **have I got some stories to tell you.**

⭐ **CATERING ..** *I chose it so maybe I should make the best of it*

A world of rooftops, film sets, drag queens, tortoises, melted trestles, terrified business partners, and clients who believed the laws of physics were optional.

And I loved every minute of it.-

⭐ **CATERING**

If the hotel years taught me survival, and the pub years taught me diplomacy, then the catering years taught me everything else — mostly how to stay calm while the world caught fire around me. Sometimes literally.

Launching my own catering company was equal parts excitement, terror, and blind optimism. I had a very understanding wife, a van, a business partner, a handful of staff, and absolutely no idea that the next few decades would involve rooftops, film sets, drag queens, terrified clients, terrified staff, and the occasional brush with royalty.

But goodness, it was fun.

It’s almost impossible to pick out specific “incidents” from my career that now make me howl with laughter but, at the time, had me wishing the ground would swallow me whole. That’s the trouble with memory — it behaves like a dodgy jukebox. Press one button and suddenly three more tunes start playing. As one gets older, life becomes a constant chorus of “Oh, that reminds me…”

⭐ A Love Story (Against All Odds)

Anyway, one scorcher of a day we were catering a buffet lunch in a private house. Helen — my manageress, general organiser of chaos, and part-time sergeant major — asked if the girls could prep the sandwiches in the garden rather than roast alive in the kitchen. Sensible enough. I reminded her to tell them to cover the sandwiches with cold damp tea towels, the old-school method of keeping things fresh before refrigeration became fashionable.

The girls were a brilliant bunch who’d been with me for yonks, so off they went, happily buttering away in the sunshine. Then suddenly Helen let out a shriek so piercing it could have cracked the Royal Doulton. We looked under the table and there, gazing adoringly at her exposed big toe, was the houseowner’s pet tortoise — Terry — who had clearly mistaken her toe for the love of his reptilian life.

Once we’d calmed Helen down (and tried, with limited success, to hide our laughter), we decided to relocate Terry to the far end of the garden. We assumed the sheer distance would dampen his romantic enthusiasm. How naïve we were. Moments later, Helen yelled, “I don’t believe it… he’s back!”

This time we marched Terry to the end of the garden again and constructed a makeshift Berlin Wall of deckchairs halfway along the lawn. Surely that would stop him. But we had underestimated the power of reptilian lust. Suddenly the deckchairs began wobbling, then toppling, as Terry head-butted his way through like a tiny armoured tank determined to reclaim his bride.

In the end, he had to be popped over the fence into the neighbour’s garden. We did feel a pang of guilt — but the sandwiches were a priority, and frankly, Helen’s toes had suffered enough for one afternoon.

Of course, once you’ve survived a lovestruck tortoise, you start to believe you’ve seen everything catering can throw at you. But no — the universe always has a little surprise tucked up its sleeve. Which brings me neatly to one of our earliest “high-up” events:

⭐ ***Many Names***

(Or: How Not to Name a Catering Company)

Like all new businesses, we had our share of “brilliant ideas” for company names — and a generous helping of “what on earth were we thinking.” My first stroke of genius, back in the pre-internet era, was to name the company **GRUB**. Punchy, memorable… but, as it turned out, positioned right next to **PEST CONTOL** in the newspaper listings. Nothing says “Bon appétit” quite like appearing beside “Rat Removal — 24 Hours.”

A rebrand was urgently required.

In those days, **Yellow Pages** ruled the advertising world, and alphabetical order was everything. So we went with **Arkay Catering**, which later evolved into **Abacus Catering**- closer to the start of the listings- this was complete with the strapline: **“The Name You Can Count On.”** I still think that’s rather clever — but of course I would. No one else has ever agreed with me, but that’s hardly the point.

And yes — the photo says ‘old fashioned but it was taken *before* the makeover.

Please note, for the historical record: I still had hair then. A glorious, living, breathing entity that has since retired early without notice.

Then came the internet. I taught myself coding, built **thirteen websites**, and even managed to get us high on Google. I was basically a one-man Silicon Valley, minus the hoodie and the millions. But I digress.

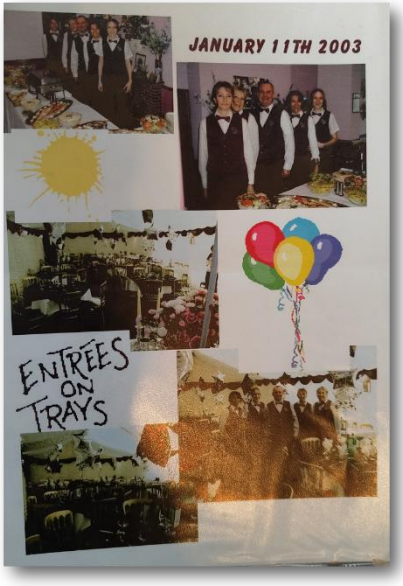
As we shifted from private house parties and marquees to corporate catering, I rebranded again — this time to **entrees-ontrays.com** I thought it was witty, descriptive, and sophisticated.

It wasn't.

I spent more time spelling it out than actually catering. But despite the name confusion, we'd finally hit on a formula that worked — even if the branding suggested otherwise.

Thing, a wonderfully quirky PR company in Soho, constantly challenged our thinking. They always demanded something novel — unusual food, unexpected themes, and once even a disco in the heart of Leicester Square. Great for their guests, less great for us, hauling equipment through crowds of tourists while pretending this was all perfectly normal. Still, it was enormous fun, and Colin and I were "honoured" with VIP membership to a top disco. (As if we ever had time to go.)

⭐ **VIP..'Th2ng',** a wonderfully quirky PR company in Soho, constantly challenged our thinking. They always demanded something novel — unusual food, unexpected themes, tee shirts, and once even a disco in the heart of Leicester Square. Great for their guests, less great for us, hauling equipment through crowds of tourists while pretending this was all perfectly normal. Still, it was enormous fun, and Colin and I were "honoured" with VIP membership to a top disco. (As if we ever had time to go.)



⭐ **CHANGING TIMES**

Catering didn't just evolve over the years — it sprinted ahead while we jogged behind, trying not to spill the canapés. Suddenly everyone wanted "fusion food," which sounded terribly modern and exciting, so naturally we adopted it at once. Our canapé list grew so long it needed its own postcode.

But it wasn't just the food that needed updating — we did too. Our old look of gingham collars and aprons (very "village fête meets 1950s tea room") simply wasn't cutting it for the sleek, modern at-home catering world. So out went the gingham, and in came sporty tabards with logos, streamlined outfits, and a general air of "Yes, we *are* professionals, thank you for noticing."

And yes — the photo says 'old fashioned but it was taken *before* the makeover.

Please note, for the historical record: I still had hair then. A glorious, living, breathing entity that has since retired early without notice.

⭐ **The Oxford Street Rooftop BBQ** (Or: How to Lose Weight in Ten Minutes)

This particular adventure took place on Oxford Street, in the centre of london — a company prize-giving followed by a rooftop BBQ with panoramic views of London. It sounded terribly glamorous when they booked it. In reality, it was more like a team-building exercise designed by someone who hated us.

Parking was, naturally, impossible. So we did the usual: dumped the equipment by a side entrance and left one poor staff member guarding it like a rottweiler with a clipboard. That’s when a security jobsworth spotted our gas cylinders and declared, with great ceremony, that we were forbidden from using the goods lift.

So up the stairs we went. Many flights. Endless flights. By the time we reached the roof, we were so sweaty and breathless we could have been served *as* the BBQ.

Which turned out to be lucky, because the BBQ refused to light. Not a spark. Not even a polite cough. Meanwhile, the MD was one floor down presenting prizes, giving a speech, and a ravenous crowd was about to be released in our direction like a stampede of office-trained wildebeest.

I snapped into crisis mode.

“Stuart — find disposable BBQs. Now. Run.”

He stared at me as if I’d asked him to locate a snowman in the Sahara. “We’re in the middle of Oxford Street. Where am I supposed to find BBQs?”

But off he sprinted, and just as I was preparing to fling myself off the roof, he reappeared — breathless, glowing, triumphant — clutching a bag of Millet’s disposable BBQs like a returning war hero. I metaphorically kissed him. (Physically would have required a defibrillator.)

We set them up on our trestles, slowed the guests down with welcome drinks, and managed to serve the food just in time. If anyone wondered why I looked like I’d been caught in a tropical storm, it wasn’t rain — it was simply my body giving up.

Later, when the guests had gone and we were packing up, we discovered the disposable BBQs had melted perfect, neat, rectangular holes straight through our trestles

Just another day at the office.

….and people wonder why caterers drink

⭐ **The Highgate Mega-BBQ**

We catered regularly for an organisation that helped young people transition into teaching careers. Lovely crowd. Appreciative. Hungry.

This major event in Highgate involved several hundred guests. We lined the playground and sports-field with trestles, salads, buns, disposables, and every BBQ we owned — charcoal drums, Greek firebrick grills, gas units, the lot.

The queue stretched into the next postcode.

My manageress Sanja, with her delightful accent, kept shouting, “More beergers, Ralph, more beergers,” while handing me cold drinks to stop me keeling over.

It was like working inside a furnace. Hot weather, hotter BBQs, endless young people, and a team slowly melting into puddles.

Every time I think of BBQs, I hear Sanja’s voice urging me on.

⭐ **The Balcony BBQ — Smoke Gets in Your Eyes**

BBQs were always a gamble.

No two were ever the same — each one a unique blend of fun, panic, and mild combustion.

They looked effortless to guests, but behind the scenes they required military-level planning and a small miracle.

“Serving Chaos: My Life in Catering”

One particular BBQ still haunts me. It began with a last-minute phone call from a prospective host who said he lived “just off the Queensway near Notting Hill Gate.” Few gardens there, I thought — so it must be one of those private squares. Wrong.

Because of the short notice, I skipped my usual pre-function reconnaissance. When we arrived with the BBQ, staff, and food, expecting to be guided to a leafy outdoor space, we were instead told — with alarming cheerfulness — that the BBQ was to be held on the balcony.

The building was old, the lift even older — one of those wrought-iron cages that clanked shut like a medieval torture device. After several heroic journeys up and down, we finally managed to get the BBQ, food, and utensils to the top floor and onto the balcony. It was a young crowd, full of laughter, and since there was no room for guests outside, my staff passed food through the window to the party indoors. All went swimmingly — until my manageress, bless her, pointed out a small logistical snag.

“When we take the BBQ down again,” she said, “it’ll still be hot. We won’t be able to take it down in the lift”

Brilliant observation. Her solution? Pour jugs of water over the glowing embers to cool it down. In principle, genius. In practice, catastrophic.

We hadn’t reckoned with the London wind. The moment the water hit the coals, a billowing cloud of smoke and steam rolled straight into the apartment. I turned to investigate the coughing and was greeted by a dense fog so thick I couldn’t see a single guest — just the sound of laughter and wheezing somewhere in the mist.

Fortunately, everyone took it in good humour. The evening became a surreal blend of barbecue and smoke machine — a zany night that none of us, nor the building’s fire alarms, would ever forget.

⭐ The IKEA BBQ

By this stage, catering corporate functions had become second nature to us. We had long since discovered that the designated *“organiser”* was usually someone who couldn’t organise a brewery tour in a brewery, but had been officially delegated to “handle the catering”.

The concepts were always marvellous — visionary, even — but as non-caterers, they couldn’t be expected to spot the hazards, the logistical nightmares, or the subtle ways in which their brilliant idea might kill someone.

So we learned the gentle art of **suggesting improvements** in a way that made it appear *they* had thought of them. See? I *had* learned something.

Which brings me to the **massive IKEA BBQ**.

On paper, it was a triumph: a vast outdoor corporate celebration, Swedish-inspired, with enough flat-packed equipment to build a small village. In reality, it required a *wee bit of tweaking* — by which I mean several days of quiet panic, re-engineering, and the sort of behind-the-scenes diplomacy normally reserved for peace treaties.

But tweak it we did. And on the day, the whole thing ran like a dream. The organisers beamed with pride, convinced it had all unfolded exactly as they’d planned.

We, of course, knew the truth.

If IKEA ever needed instructions for assembling a successful BBQ, we could have written them — in 47 steps, with an Allen key, and a helpful diagram of what happens when you don’t listen to your caterer

⭐ ***We Will Rock You — Literally***

In 2002 and again in 2004 we catered for *We Will Rock You* at Tottenham Court Road. The second event was a major celebration, and to our astonishment Lynn and I were offered front-row seats. Not just good seats — *front row*. The sort of seats normally reserved for royalty, record producers, or people who can actually play the guitar.

The atmosphere was electric before the show even began. The entire audience were die-hard fans, dressed accordingly — leather, studs, glitter, wigs, and enough Queen memorabilia to open a museum. You could feel the excitement humming through the theatre like an amplifier warming up.

And then came the moment: Brian May. In person. There he was, just a few feet away, guitar in hand, hair as magnificent as legend promised. When he played, the audience didn’t just applaud — they erupted. They danced, they cheered, they roared, and the applause went on so long it practically needed its own interval.

Lynn and I sat there, grinning like teenagers at their first concert, swept up in the sheer joy of it all. For once, we weren’t serving canapés or worrying about timings — we were simply part of the celebration.

A rare night when the caterers got the treat.

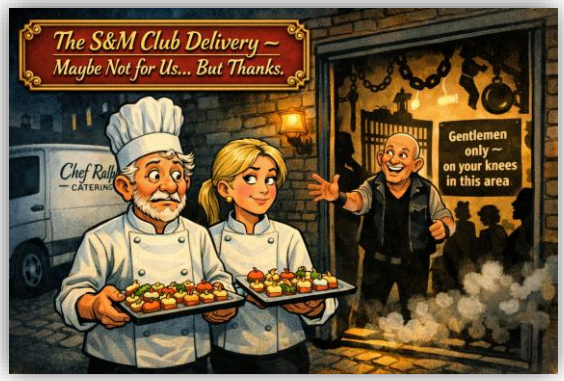
⭐ Maybe Not for Us… But Thanks

The S&M Club Delivery

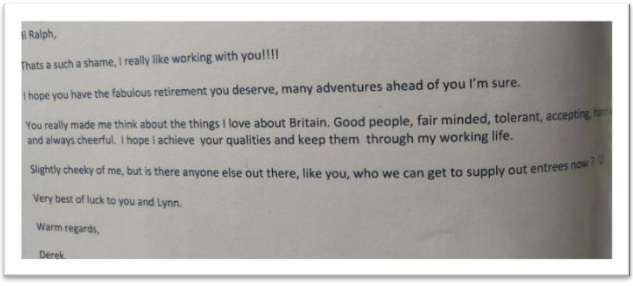
Among our more *memorable* monthly deliveries was one for an organisation whose name alone made the entire team suddenly find something very interesting on the floor. Derek — cheerful, polite, and completely unfazed — rang out of the blue one day, and before long he and his club had become regular clients.

The venue was in Battersea, tucked away in a labyrinth of backstreets. After ringing a bell and waiting long enough to consider abandoning the van and changing careers, we were finally escorted inside. Our route took us through a dimly lit area decorated with chains, cages, and a large sign that read, with admirable clarity: “Gentlemen only — on your knees in this area.” We chose not to investigate further.

It was only set-up time, but Derek repeatedly offered us free entry if we fancied coming back later. We declined with the kind of polite enthusiasm usually reserved for surprise dental work, though I’ll admit — curiosity was bubbling away like a pan of unattended stock.



We’d imagined a small gathering of a dozen people at most. Derek casually mentioned that several hundred regularly attended. Several hundred. At that point, we simply nodded, smiled, and carried on unloading the canapés, all the while thinking: “Maybe not for us… but thanks.”



Hi Ralph,

Thats a such a shame, I really like working with you!!!!

I hope you have the fabulous retirement you deserve, many adventures ahead of you I'm sure.

You really made me think about the things I love about Britain. Good people, fair minded, tolerant, accepting, hard and always cheerful. I hope I achieve your qualities and keep them through my working life.

Slightly cheeky of me, but is there anyone else out there, like you, who we can get to supply out entrees now ? ☺

Very best of luck to you and Lynn.

Warm regards,

Derek.

⭐ The St John’s Wood Penthouse (Where Dessert Was Cancelled)

It was meant to be a small, elegant dinner in a beautiful St John’s Wood penthouse. Just a few girls serving, and me — *chef supreme* — presiding over a gleaming, state-of-the-art kitchen that made me feel like I’d finally made it.

Halfway through main-course service, my manageress popped her head in.

“It’s getting hot in there,” she said, smiling.

I shrugged. “Not really our place to open windows.”

She returned moments later. “It’s really getting hotter still.”

I still didn’t twig. “Ask the host if you can open a window.”

She leaned in, lowered her voice, and delivered the line that finally switched on the lightbulb:

“I think he’s otherwise engaged.”

Ah. **Oh.** Suddenly the rising temperature made perfect sense.

Before we could even clear the table — let alone present the magnificent dessert waiting proudly on the counter — the host appeared, red-faced, glowing, and beaming like a man who had just completed a triathlon.

“Fantastic meal, Ralph! Let me help you with everything.”

And help he did. Before we knew it, our equipment was neatly stacked outside the lift, the girls had been tipped with impressive generosity, and the host had vanished back to… continue his evening’s entertainment.

Shortest function on record. No dessert served. No complaints received.

And I can only assume that **everyone** went home fully satisfied.

“Serving Chaos: My Life in Catering”

⭐ The Grammar School Dinner & The Dreaded Gavel

In the early ’70s, Forty Hall was given a grand refurbishment by the London Borough of Enfield, and the main hall was sympathetically transformed into a banqueting venue. Lynn and I happened to be friendly with the Head of Arts and Entertainments — a man who could turn a committee meeting into a full-length opera — and he decided to stage a public event to show off the newly polished gem. Naturally, it went to committee (where else), and in 1974 we tendered to cater what became known, with great ceremony, as *The Medieval Banquet*.

There was only one small problem: our medieval-banquet-catering expertise was, shall we say, limited. Not something that came up daily between the vol-au-vents and the chicken chasseur. So we decided to research the competition. Our wives heard the plan, and of course insisted that they came too — purely for academic purposes, you understand.

Off we trotted to Hatfield House, where they occasionally staged Medieval Banquets of the “fun and slightly chaotic” variety. Notebooks in hand, we settled in with a drop of mead to observe. Inspiration, however, was slow to arrive. So we had another wee dram. And another. Mead, as it turns out, is sweet, innocent-looking, and entirely treacherous. Before long we were giggling like schoolchildren, our notebooks still pristine and untouched, and our “research trip” had drifted into something more like a jolly day out. Not quite the scholarly investigation we had promised ourselves.

Still, despite the lack of internet and the abundance of mead, we managed to pull together a great deal of information. The event was well advertised, sold out quickly, and the guests entered into the spirit of things by arriving in full medieval dress. When the day arrived, drama groups roamed the hall with bears dancing, dogs trotting about, and the top table hosting a suitably regal “Royal Party” who delivered a solemn speech on the value of salt — complete with ceremony.

We even persuaded my staff to adopt a nod towards traditional garb, and actors mingled with the crowd, adding to the hilarity. The whole thing was a riot of colour, noise, and good humour, and we received a great many thanks for putting it all together.

We went on to cater countless functions at Forty Hall over the years, and it became one of our most popular venues. The hall itself was on two levels, with a raised side area tucked behind a few pillars — a charming architectural quirk that made seating plans a logistical nightmare. But that, as they say, is another story

Forty Hall was (and still is) a beautiful building, though the seating plan we had to adopt was always a nightmare thanks to pillars and raised areas.

⭐ **The Great Grammar School Gavel Trap**

One annual grammar school dinner will haunt me forever. I always warned my staff:

“When you hear the gavel for speeches — run. If you don’t, you’ll be trapped in the hall until the next Ice Age – they do love their speeches”

Naturally, on this particular evening, I was at the *far* end of the hall when the dreaded bang-bang echoed.

Instant silence. I froze - I was trapped.

I tried to suppress my giggles — the kind that only arrive when you absolutely must not laugh — but eventually I had to make a break for it.

The entire hall watched as I tiptoed across the parquet floor, each step echoing like cannon fire. My business partner Colin pressed his face against the kitchen window, grimacing and contorting himself in an Olympic-level attempt to make me laugh.

He succeeded.

By the time I reached the swing door, he held it shut with his foot. I mouthed, “Let me in.” He shook his head with the solemnity of a man refusing entry to a nightclub.

It felt like an eternity. It was probably a minute.

When I finally got inside, the words I used would have had this book banned from every respectable library in Britain

And speaking of venues with “quirks,” let me take you from Tudor splendour to something altogether different: a paddle steamer on the Thames that tried its best to kill us every time the tide went out.

⭐ **The Tattershall Castle & The New Year’s Eve Staff Stampede**

Not all our adventures were land-based. We often catered on the PS *Tattershall Castle*, a permanently moored paddle steamer on the Thames. A lovely venue — unless the tide was low, in which case the gangplank transformed into a black-run ski slope. Guests tip-toed down it like Bambi on ice, and we quickly abandoned the idea of lugging china up and down. Disposables became our closest friends.

Just across the way was a gentleman's club overlooking the river, and we catered their New Year's Eve parties several years running. Staff *begged* to be put on that job. At midnight, they were invited onto the terrace to watch the fireworks explode over London — and remember, we still paid them 'special' rates. It was the only event where morale was so high I half-expected them to tip *me*.

⭐ 20 Funerals, Fear & Hair-Drying Corpses

Funeral catering is often surprisingly jolly — especially when the deceased was elderly and had requested it to be a celebration of their life.

But my business partner, Colin, hated anything to do with death.

At one old house, we overheard a family member say, "The undertakers will be here shortly to screw her down."

Colin went white. He thought it was some medieval ritual involving wood screws. Our tactful manageress explained gently that it simply meant closing the coffin.

Just as he recovered, he walked into the front room only to find a prone figure lying on the carpet with her head by the fireplace.

That was all he needed…He fled.

The "corpse" chased him — she was drying her hair using the electric fire.

…..Not Colin's finest day.

"Serving Chaos: My Life in Catering"

⭐ Docklands, Hard Hats & Jobsworths

As Docklands and Broadgate developed, we gained clients like Computershare, Merrill Lynch, Bank Tokyo Mitsubishi, and Stateside and many others

At Stateside, a *jobsworth* refused to let us cross a small basement loading area to reach the goods lift without hard hats and hi-vis jackets.

We borrowed them. We looked ridiculous. We fed the starving masses anyway.

OUR COMMUNITY

30 years as a chef on many starry nights

Rambo great: Chef to celebrities Ralph Kiey is still hard at work

Catering for IT needs

Ralph Kiey

⭐ **Extolling the Joys of Catering** By now I was fully committed to catering….although some may say that I should be committed!...but I realised that many young people lacked academic skills but once they were introduced to catering in many forms: food preparation, hotel work or recipe development, there were so many areas where they could really prove themselves and a few years ago I mentored many young people entering the industry but much earlier than that I was at the forefront of introducing the internet and computer skills to many young people (hard to believe that there was an earlier life without these 'modern innovations')

⭐ The Great Inter-School Cook-Off (or: Herding Teenagers With Knives)

I decided, quite out of the blue, to see whether a group of wildly different young people — united only by a faint interest in food and a strong interest in not listening to adults — could be coaxed into growing this tiny seed of an idea into something resembling a career.

“Serving Chaos: My Life in Catering”

Let me assure you: the logistics of catering a major event pale into insignificance when compared with organising a catering contest between two schools and a college. But somehow — through luck, persistence, and possibly divine intervention — it worked.

The minibus from Enfield and Barnet arrived at Newham College in a state of high excitement. Rumour had it that passports might be required. (Teenagers, as ever, masters of geography.)

Newham College had laid out the ingredients exactly as I’d specified, and I promptly promoted their students to “mentees” — after explaining what the word meant, naturally.

It was genuinely wonderful watching them all work together: chopping, stirring, plating, and occasionally remembering to breathe. They prepared a vegetarian starter, main course, and dessert — dishes they’d practised at their own schools — while the older mentees took their supervisory roles with the seriousness of junior sous-chefs at The Ritz.

Every so often one would sidle up to me and whisper, “Will we win, chef?” To which I replied, in my best mock-stern voice, “I’m judging, so you mustn’t ask me that.”

After a short break, the teams presented their dishes for judging. I tasted, nodded solemnly, and pretended to be far more important than I actually was.

And because they had all done so brilliantly, I awarded them a joint first prize — which caused an explosion of joy that could probably be heard in Essex.

Then came the best part

I presented each young cook with a Personal Winners Award certificate for excellence in presentation, taste, tidiness, and minimal wastage. The mentees (once the meaning of the word had been explained) all received their own certificates for Excellent Work in Mentoring Young Trainee Cooks

The teaching staff looked on proudly… and then looked utterly stunned when I presented *them* with certificates for Cooperation, Patience, and Good Humour. (Frankly, they deserved medals.)

The excitement was infectious. Seeing them all proudly comparing certificates made every ounce of effort worthwhile.

And I still wonder, from time to time, whether any of them followed a culinary path because of that day — a small spark that might just have lit a lifelong flame

⭐ **The Queen’s Silver Jubilee Street Party**

In 1977 we catered the Elstree Street Silver Jubilee party. Everyone paid a small fee and received a ticket, which they exchanged at our “state-of-the-art kitchen” — also known as the garage of No. 23. We served cheese, biscuits, and dessert. Afterwards we collected rubbish with black sacks while the entire street partied.

Colin and myself with respective wives ‘pitching in ’Simple. Joyful’.

Perfect.

⭐ **CHF & The Pimlico Breakfasts**We had, and still have, a soft spot for CHF, a charity supporting

From: Kate Soars [KateS@chfed.org.uk]
Sent: 28 July 2010 11:57
To: ralph.kley@entrees-ontrays.com
Subject: THANK YOU!

Ralph,

Thank you so much for you very kind donation of the delicious bagels and mini pastries!
They went down a storm.

We are so grateful for your generosity and in making our trip for children with heart conditions so spec
Thank you from everyone at the Children's Heart Federation!!

Best wishes x

Kate Soars
Relationship Manager
Children's Heart Federation
Level One
2-4 Great Eastern Street
London EC2A 3NW

Tel: 020 7422 0630
Web: www.chfed.org.uk
Twitter page: click here

Help save a child's life today

children with heart problems. Each year we provided breakfast in a Pimlico church after the children had a sleepover at the Natural History Museum — a “snoreasoureous.”

Many of our great friends also gave us donations so the children could run wild in the museum shop.

One year they took us on a charity disco boat ride down the Thames. We loved every minute.

"Serving Chaos: My Life in Catering"

⭐ Barristers, Balconies, and Blue Blood

Catering for the ***** ***** Barristers at Ascot was always a logistical nightmare of timing dressed up as a picnic. We had to coordinate marquee delivery, tables, chairs, and enough catering equipment to feed a small regiment — all to a precise patch of grass. This was pre-Google Maps, so staff locating us was an adventure involving guesswork, landmarks, and divine intervention.

Once the field kitchen was assembled under its awning, the barristers arrived and the serious business of drinking began. Meanwhile, Lynn was dispatched to Ascot.

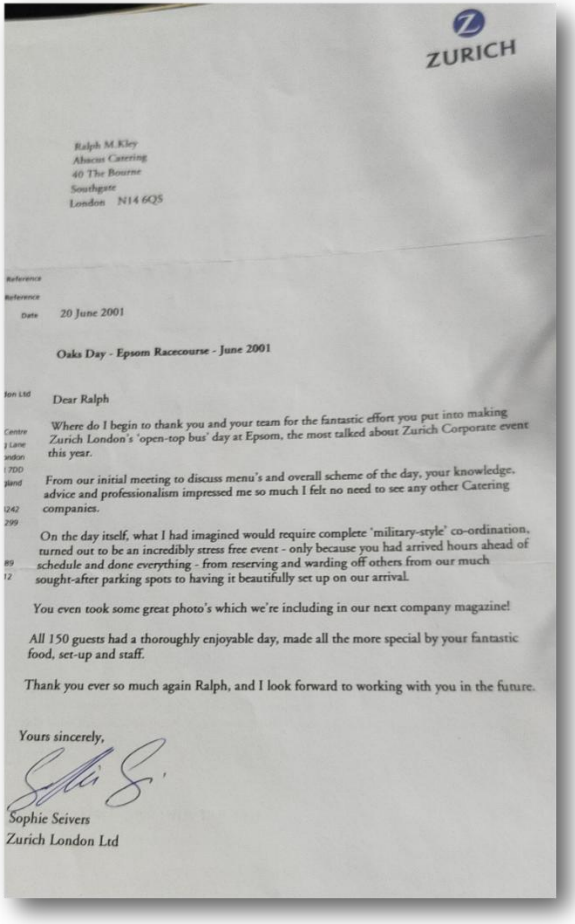
In a quiet country lane, a policeman waved her down and asked her to switch off her engine and step out. Puzzled, she complied — and immediately the Queen glided past in an open horse-drawn carriage, waving graciously. Lynn was thrilled and responded with a wave back. It was the most regal traffic jam in history.

Back at the marquee, the atmosphere was decidedly less royal and more Bacchanalian. Helen, my manageress, spotted a lady at the far end of the tent sitting in what might politely be called an *unladylike position*. Despite our pleas to let it go, Helen marched across with the authority of a headmistress. We watched as the lady adjusted herself which lasted all of a full five minutes — a heroic effort — before the evening's "spirits" reclaimed her and she slumped forward once more. At that point, Helen surrendered, muttering something about occupational hazards.

It was Ascot at its finest: horses, royalty, barristers, and a field kitchen held together by sheer willpower — and a manageress with more courage than sense.

⭐ Zurich Insurance & The Double-Decker Buffet

Zurich Insurance had excellent staff relations. One year we provided two double-deckers to transport 150 guests to Epsom, then set up a buffet awning between the buses where we served elevenses, lunch and even afternoon tea. Many of the young guests toured Epsom to enjoy the day and during a quiet period we caught and evicted gypsy tearaways who'd snuck aboard to steal anything not nailed down.



ZURICH

Ralph M Kley
Abacus Catering
40 The Bourne
Southgate
London N14 6QS

Reference
Reference
Date 20 June 2001

Oaks Day - Epsom Racecourse - June 2001

Dear Ralph

Where do I begin to thank you and your team for the fantastic effort you put into making Zurich London's 'open-top bus' day at Epsom, the most talked about Zurich Corporate event this year.

From our initial meeting to discuss menu's and overall scheme of the day, your knowledge, advice and professionalism impressed me so much I felt no need to see any other Catering companies.

On the day itself, what I had imagined would require complete 'military-style' co-ordination, turned out to be an incredibly stress free event - only because you had arrived hours ahead of schedule and done everything - from reserving and warding off others from our much sought-after parking spots to having it beautifully set up on our arrival.

You even took some great photo's which we're including in our next company magazine!

All 150 guests had a thoroughly enjoyable day, made all the more special by your fantastic food, set-up and staff.

Thank you ever so much again Ralph, and I look forward to working with you in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Sophie Seivers
Zurich London Ltd

⭐ Film location catering, Graveyards & Fibre-Optic Hairpieces

We tried film-location catering properly once.

Never again.

“Serving Chaos: My Life in Catering”

Big shoots require massive specialised actor-seating and equipment and industrial catering stations. Perfect if it’s your main business. Not ideal if you’re dabbling.

We hurried back to the beach.

Low-budget shoots were fun.

One shoot took place in a graveyard where a passer-by, spotting our food-laden trestles in the open awning was heard to say, “That’s where I want to be buried — look how they look after the inmates.”

We were invited to the Leicester Square preview and even mentioned in the credits.

<u>⭐ The Fibre-Optic Fiasco (or: When the Future Forgot Its Batteries)</u>

The event was meant to be cutting-edge — *literally* — featuring brand-new fibre-optic hairpieces. The venue: a vacant, undeveloped site off Tottenham Court Road. The audience: journalists expecting a dazzling technological spectacle. The models: rehearsed to dance provocatively before delivering a dramatic blackout-and-light-up finale.

And then there was **Barbara**.

I recognised her instantly — a stripper from Queen’s, the club

opposite my Berwick Street restaurant in Soho. The moment she spotted me, she darted over and whispered: **“Ralph, don’t tell anyone where you know me from.”**

And honestly, this is the first time I’ve ever spoken about it.

The grand finale was timed to perfection: Big band drum roll… Lights out… Hairpieces ON…

Except the battery power was so feeble that the darkness simply… continued. No glow. No shimmer. No futuristic halo of light.

Just a room full of journalists staring into pitch blackness, wondering if the future had been cancelled.

Very futuristic. Very odd. Very Soho.

⭐ **Madame Jojo’s & The Most Fabulous Removal Crew**

Delivering to **Madame Jojo’s** in Soho was a logistical nightmare. Red lines everywhere, traffic wardens lurking like predators, and Wardour Street roaring with life.

Lynn came along as my unofficial lookout. I parked illegally — naturally — and dashed across the road to the top of the steep steps leading down to the club.

There, waiting for me, was a line of **gorgeous girls in glass heels**, ready to pass boxes down the staircase like a glamorous human conveyor belt.

Except… They were all fellas. They were fabulous. And they were **incredibly** helpful.

Honestly, I’ve never had a more efficient unloading team in my life

⭐ **Parking in London — or, How to Win an Argument With a Warden Who Isn’t There**

Anyone who delivers in London has a special word for traffic wardens. I won’t repeat it here — I’d quite like this book to stay on sale.

One particular adventure involved a Russian bank near St Martin’s Lane. They needed a canapé delivery, and after checking access points, we decided the quickest route was to park in St Martin’s Lane itself and sprint down a narrow pedestrian alley opposite the bank. Simple. Efficient. Foolproof.

We even checked with the warden, who assured us — with the confidence of a man who had no intention of honouring his own words — that we could load there for a few minutes.

So off we dashed, trays in hand, threading our way down the alley like contestants in a catering-themed obstacle course.

Imagine our fury when we returned to find a parking ticket stuck to the windscreen… and the warden had vanished like a magician’s assistant who’d finally had enough.

Naturally, we appealed.

The first response informed us — with great authority — that our delivery address was not the same as our parking location. We politely pointed out that the appeals office was in Scotland, and we were London drivers, so perhaps they might like to check a map and notice the pedestrian alley connecting the two.

Their second attempt was even better. They claimed the warden had looked through our windows and seen no sign of deliveries.

We replied that this was impressive, considering we were driving a white refrigerated van with no windows whatsoever.

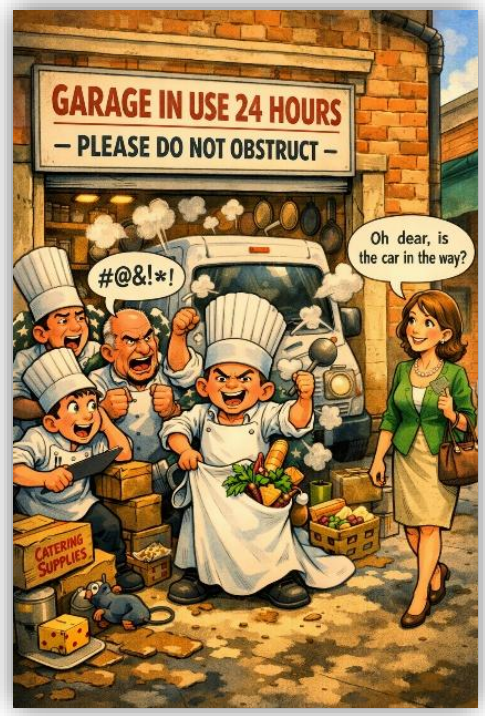
The parking ticket was cancelled.

Victory for common sense. And for the catering industry’s long-standing belief that wardens possess supernatural abilities — including invisibility, teleportation, and the power to issue tickets while promising they won’t.

⭐ The Garage That Time Forgot

Our catering kitchen was a converted two-storey bakery tucked behind a shop, and our refrigerated van lived in the garage at the back. Every delivery began with the same ritual: last-minute additions, frantic loading, and a chorus of muttered oaths that could curdle cream.

To prevent the daily drama of cars blocking our exit, we printed a large, authoritative sign for the garage door: “GARAGE IN USE 24 HOURS — PLEASE DO NOT OBSTRUCT.” It looked so official we half-expected passing motorists to salute. For a while, it worked — until one morning, we opened the garage to find a car parked squarely across the exit again. We stood there, fuming, watching the clock tick and our tempers boil.



Then, round the corner, came a lady — strolling at the pace of a Sunday afternoon — who looked at the scene and said, “Oh dear, is the car in the way?”Well, the air turned blue. Every known dialect of kitchen profanity was deployed with gusto. She waited patiently, hands clasped, until the tirade subsided… then said sweetly,

“Oh, it’s not my car — I was just asking.”

We were struck dumb. Too embarrassed even to apologise, we simply climbed into the van (the offending car now having amazingly disappeared) and drove off, humbled and slightly hoarse.

⭐ Sticky Toffee Pudding: My Accidental Claim to Fame

For a time I ran Chef Express kitchens — bulk meals blast-frozen and reheated in satellite units. Mopeds delivered them.

Flyers went everywhere locally but The Watford Gazette refused my advert:

“Where can you get a spotted dick at 11pm around Watford.”

No idea why!!!

I also “borrowed” a sticky toffee pudding recipe from a well-known hotel, scaled it up, and sold it to major pub groups.

I may have introduced sticky toffee pudding to the mass market.

Fame at last.

(Yes, well spotted…that is Lynn next to me in the background (just for the photo shoot…she was always on hand when the situation demanded

⭐ New Years Must Haves

Imagine our surprise when we

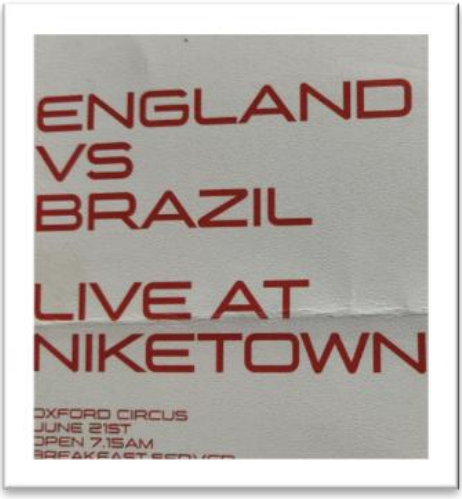
were featured in The 'Femail' Daily Mail supplement as one of 2004's Top Ten

We had no idea about this....honestly no reporter was bribed with smoked salmon canapes

⭐ The Muswell Hill Blackout

A large Muswell Hill house party. Guests everywhere. Suddenly — darkness. The electrics failed. The all-electric kitchen died instantly.

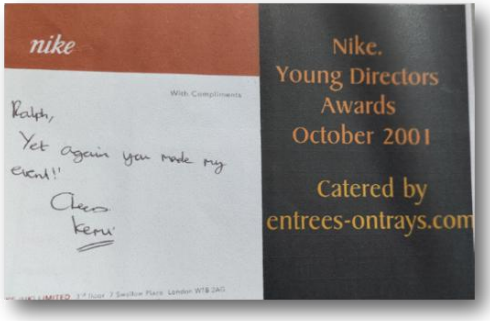
The host offered a relative's kitchen across the road. My staff formed a human chain: across the street, into the lift, up several floors, back down again, delivering hot canapés to guests who never knew the chaos behind the scenes.



When the Big Names Came Calling

As our reputation grew, so did the calibre of our clients. They were mostly wonderful to work with — energetic, imaginative, and full of ambitious ideas — but they often required the impossible… which, naturally, we did our best to provide.

We worked extensively with Nike, beginning with my girls strolling through the Oxford Street flagship store during Wimbledon week, offering strawberries and cream while dressed head-to-toe in Nike-issued white outfits. It was a brilliant bit of theatre, and the customers loved it. From there, things escalated: we catered the Young Directors Award at the Troxy in Brixton, managed Half Marathons in the park, and handled sports fixtures on Oxford Street and countless other locations where the brief was always the same — *make it seamless, make it stylish, and make it look effortless.*



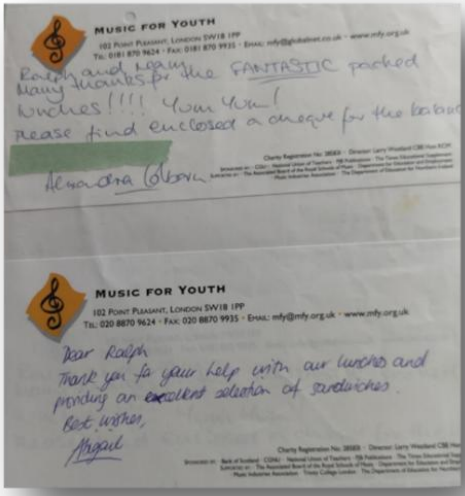
⭐ **<u>The Disney Princess Extravaganza</u>**

*(Branding Fit for Royalty)*We once catered the launch of Disney's Princess film, and Disney — being Disney — didn't do things by halves. Every disposable item arrived in perfectly coordinated colours and designs: plates, cups, napkins, even the bin liners.

It was branding on a royal scale. The guests adored it. And we learned that when Disney says "theme," they mean everything short of repainting the staff.

⭐ Music for Youth & The Clink

(From Festival Hall to Medieval Cobbles)


MUSIC FOR YOUTH

102 Point Pleasant, London SW18 1PP
Tel: 0181 870 9624 · Fax: 0181 870 9935 · Email: mfy@globalnet.co.uk · www.mfy.org.uk

Ralph and Lynn
Many thanks for the FANTASTIC packed lunches!!!! Yum Yum!
Please find enclosed a cheque for the labour

Charity Registration No. 38683 · Director: Larry Woolford CBE Hon RCM
Patron: CBE · National Union of Teachers · RB Publications · The Times Educational Supplement
Sponsored by: The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music · Department for Education and Employment
Supported by: The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music · The Department of Education for Northern Ireland
Music Industry Association · Trinity College London

MUSIC FOR YOUTH

102 Point Pleasant, London SW18 1PP
Tel: 020 8870 9624 · Fax: 020 8870 9935 · Email: mfy@mfy.org.uk · www.mfy.org.uk

Dear Ralph
Thank you for your help with our lunches and providing an excellent selection of sandwiches.
Best wishes,
Abigail

Charity Registration No. 38683 · Director: Larry Woolford CBE Hon RCM
Sponsored by: Bank of Scotland · CDM/ · National Union of Teachers · RB Publications · The Times Educational Supplement
Supported by: The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music · Department for Education and Employment
Music Industry Association · Trinity College London · The Department of Education for Northern Ireland

Another long-standing client was Music for Youth at the Festival Hall — a delightful organisation, unfailingly polite, and a joy to work with. We handled countless deliveries for them over the years.

And then there was The Clink — a venue that required us to drive over Thames-side cobbled streets to gain access. It felt less like a delivery and more like a pilgrimage to the Middle Ages. All we needed was a horse and a torch.

⭐ The Vanessa Feltz Incident

(Faces, Fame, and My Total Inability to Recognise Either)

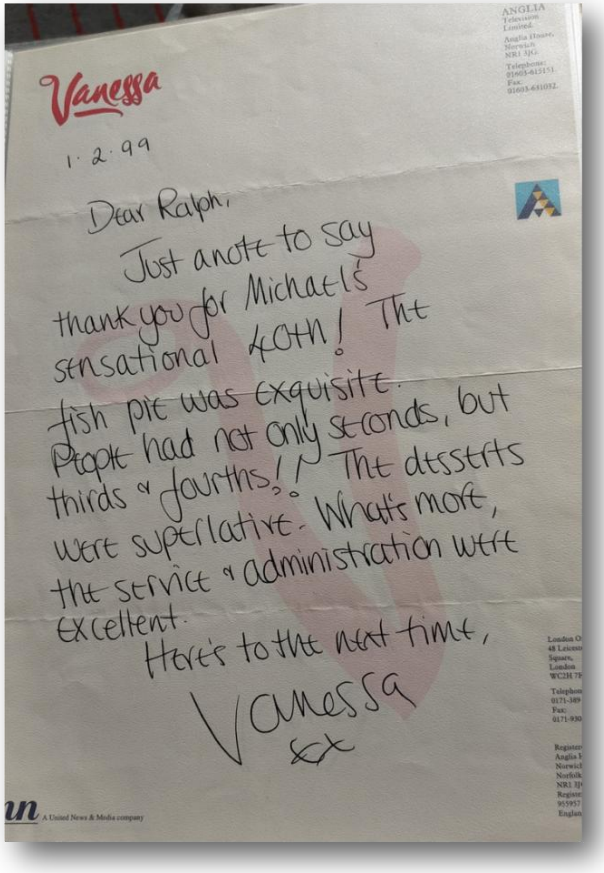
All of this took place in the pre-internet era, when every potential client had to be visited in person. I spent long days driving around London and the suburbs, discussing every detail face-to-face before producing a quote.

One evening I returned home later than usual. Lynn asked why.

I explained that the client was very nice but extremely exacting — and that she reminded me of Vanessa Feltz.

Lynn looked at me and said, "That *was* Vanessa Feltz."

Well… I never was good with faces.



ANGLIA Television Limited.
Anglia House, Norwich NR1 3JG.
Telephone: 01603-615151
Fax: 01603-631032

Vanessa

1.2.99

Dear Ralph,

Just a note to say thank you for Michael's sensational 40th! The fish pie was exquisite. People had not only seconds, but thirds & fourths!! The desserts were superlative. What's more, the service & administration were excellent.

Here's to the next time,

Vanessa
xx

A United News & Media company

⭐ **Bishopsgate: Past and Present**

(From My Father's Deli to Corporate Fort Knox)

Bishopsgate always brings back memories. My late father had a wonderfully novel deli-diner right on the main road by Liverpool Street Station. We helped him set it up, but the station's redevelopment changed everything. The entire row of shops and restaurants was demolished to make way for the new Broadgate complex.

Ironically, years later I found myself delivering to Bank Tokyo Mitsubishi inside that very development. We had allocated parking deep below the massive building, where security was taken extremely seriously. We were checked in, escorted to a sleek modern goods lift, and whisked up to a set of locked doors.

Through the glass we could see rows of young staff working away, completely oblivious to our increasingly desperate banging. Eventually someone noticed us, but for future deliveries we made sure to secure a contact name and number

Once was enough

In the end, catering for the big names taught us more than any textbook ever could. They pushed us, challenged us, occasionally exasperated us — and yet they filled our days with stories, characters, and memories that still make us smile.

Looking back, it wasn’t the prestige that mattered. It was the people, the chaos, the laughter, and the sheer absurdity of what we managed to pull off. And somehow, against all odds, we always did.

⭐ **Australia House, New Zealand House-The Roof-Garden Chain Gang**

We catered at Australia House and New Zealand House — fascinating buildings not usually open to the public.

At New Zealand House, the lift only went to the top floor. The roof garden was one level higher. We formed a chain and passed everything up manually.

The view was worth it

"Serving Chaos: My Life in Catering"

⭐ Terrorist Outrages & Unexpected Kindness

During a London terrorist incident, we were mid-delivery to Guy's Hospital. The event was obviously cancelled, but the hospital asked us to deliver where it would be appreciated and we took it all to a women's refuge close by Edgware Station

Sometimes catering gives you moments that stay with you.

⭐ Hawes & Curtis & The Spotted Dick Scandal

Delivering to Hawes & Curtis, an upmarket group of men's shirt shops, was always a nightmare — iconic locations, impossible parking.

But nothing beat the Watford Gazette refusing my advert.

Honestly. No sense of humour.

⭐ Burns Night — The Haggis That Learned to Swim

One of my regular clients was a lovely lady who organised her children's school functions. She was charming, efficient, and had a talent for persuading me to take on events that sounded simple on paper but turned into epics worthy of their own Netflix series.

Her most memorable request was a major Burns Night celebration. We'd done a full survey of the school's well-equipped kitchen, planned the layout, timed the food transport to the hall, and felt smugly prepared. Naturally, this was our first mistake.

On the big day, we arrived to discover that the school's resident caterers had locked away every single piece of equipment. Every cupboard, every drawer, every utensil — sealed as if preparing for a siege...To add insult to injury, all the gas supplies had been turned off. Timing is always critical and we allow for minor problems…but this was no MINOR problem. Catering a hot meal with no apparent way to heat it is probably why caterers don't sleep well.

Our menu?

- Parsnip soup
- Traditional haggis
- Vegetarian haggis (if that's the correct plural)
- Neeps
- Traditional dessert

All of which now needed to be cooked using… absolutely nothing.

I briefly considered tearing my hair out, but that was also in short supply as everything seemed to be at that precise moment. I looked through the kitchen service window into the ‘Burns Night’ decorated room and the guests were already seated, the pipes were warming up, and I was contemplating whether the ground might open and swallow me whole.

Suddenly salvation arrived in the form of one of my brilliant staff, who had the survival instincts of a seasoned explorer. She had found — still plugged in, still working — the one solitary item - a large electric water urn.

Within minutes, our haggises were taught to swim, bobbing about like tartan-clad lifeguards, while the neeps were wrapped in cosy foil jackets and tucked in beside them. It was not, strictly speaking, Escoffier-approved technique, but desperate times call for creative cookery.

Our wonderful hostess swept in, beautifully attired in a tartan mini — which, under normal circumstances, I would have admired more fully — and said, with devastating cheerfulness:

“So sorry! I had no idea everything would be locked away… do your best!”

We did. And somehow, against all odds, we produced a perfectly respectable Burns Night meal. The guests were delighted, the haggis survived its aquatic adventure, and no one suspected that the entire feast had been prepared using the same equipment normally reserved for staff tea breaks.

“Serving Chaos: My Life in Catering”

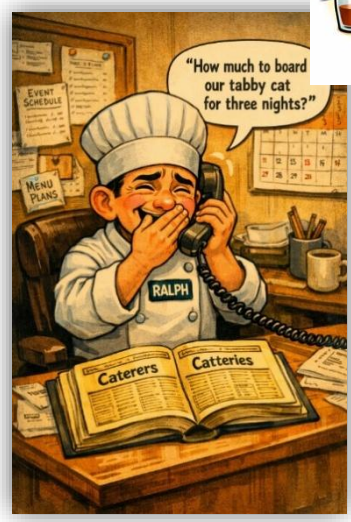
⭐ The Cat That Never Came

It’s hard to believe now, but when my company first started, there was no internet, no social media, no email, no anything. Advertising meant word of mouth, local papers, and that mighty tome of the age — Yellow Pages. We answered every phone call politely, hoping for another catering booking.

One day, the phone rang and a cheerful voice asked, “How much would it cost to board our tabby cat for three nights?”

There was a pause. Then a collective struggle not to laugh out loud.

They’d clearly mistaken ‘caterers’ for ‘catteries’ — a small difference in spelling, but a vast one in menu. We were tempted to reply, “Depends — do you want the cat roasted or grilled?” But professionalism prevailed, and we simply explained the misunderstanding as gently as possible.



It was one of those moments that summed up the era perfectly: no websites, no instant searches, just blind faith in the Yellow Pages — and the occasional feline enquiry

Another crisis averted. Another story for the book. And another reminder that in catering, the show must go on — even if the haggis has to go for a swim first.

⭐ ***Sass, Soup, and Scientific Chaos***

(A Tale of Culinary Brilliance… and One Very Embarrassing Moment)

Lynn and I were forever dreaming up new food and drink ideas — the sort of concepts that made people say, “Ooh, that’s clever,” or occasionally, “Are you sure that’s edible?” One of our favourites was Zoopernatural, a range of soups so wholesome and ingredient-aware they practically lectured you on nutrition as you drank them.

To test the market, I dragged poor Jo — my long-suffering kitchen comrade — to farmer’s markets at ungodly hours. She arrived each week dressed like an Arctic explorer: thermals, fur-lined boots, and her secret weapon — flattened cardboard boxes to stand on so the cold ground didn’t freeze her into a catering statue. Together we endured icy winds, curious customers, and the booming voice of Steve Allen on LBC, who could rant for hours without pausing for breath.

One morning, while delivering to a client in Trafalgar Square, Lynn had a flash of inspiration. “Let’s take Steve some soup samples,” she said, as casually as if we were popping round to a neighbour.

So off we drove to Leicester Square with two steaming flasks of Zoopernatural. And then — unbelievably — minutes later, we heard him on air, praising them like he’d just discovered the elixir of life. Naturally, we slapped the audio clip straight onto our website with the caption:

“Steve Allen pulls no punches… and he loved our soups. So try them yourselves.”

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We also trialled Spuddies, Lárngosh, and our roasted almond apple strudel, all of which went down a treat. But the real star of the show — the diva, the prodigy, the one that demanded a full-scale production — was Sass.

Sass was the only product we took from a scribble in my notebook all the way to a full commercial bottling run. Three of them, in fact. We even took over a bottling plant, which made us feel terribly important until we realised how many things can go wrong when you scale a recipe from a saucepan to a small swimming pool.

Before we reached that stage, though, we spent weeks in the research lab of a major juice company, trying to match my original flavour exactly. It was a delicate science involving pipettes, fruit juices, botanicals, and the sort of precision normally reserved for heart surgery.

Then came The Moment.

After endless tweaking, sniffing, swirling, and tasting, I suddenly shouted, “THAT’S IT! We’ve cracked it!”

The entire lab sprinted over, expecting a breakthrough worthy of champagne.

Instead, they found me triumphantly holding… my own original Sass sample.

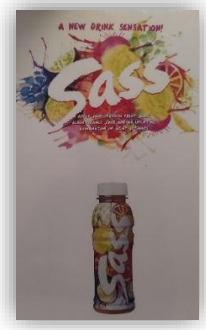
The room erupted. I stood there, confused, wondering why everyone was laughing instead of applauding my genius.

Only when they gently explained that I had just tasted my original sample that I was trying to replicate

I had, in essence, reinvented my own wheel.

But that, dear reader, is the joy of innovation: sometimes you soar, sometimes you stumble, and sometimes you accidentally congratulate yourself for discovering something you already made.

We launched Sass at three bars at Glastonbury (resisting the urge to pee on the land …see next page))..and featured it at many Sassy locations, here are a few random shots from : Conde Naste, Gay Pride and Tastes of London in Regents Park etc



Anyway… back to the story. (it was about menus….in case you’ve forgotten)

Eventually space at home became a choice between *them* or *me* and I quite liked my home life so this dictated that a decision had to be made.

In the end, I donated my entire menu collection to the Westminster School of Hospitality, in exchange for a meal for four of us in their training restaurant. And before you ask — yes, of course I photographed every single one. I printed them into five stunning volumes and uploaded the whole archive to the internet for anyone to enjoy.

A lifetime of catering, preserved in ink, card, and a slightly questionable approach to "borrowing".

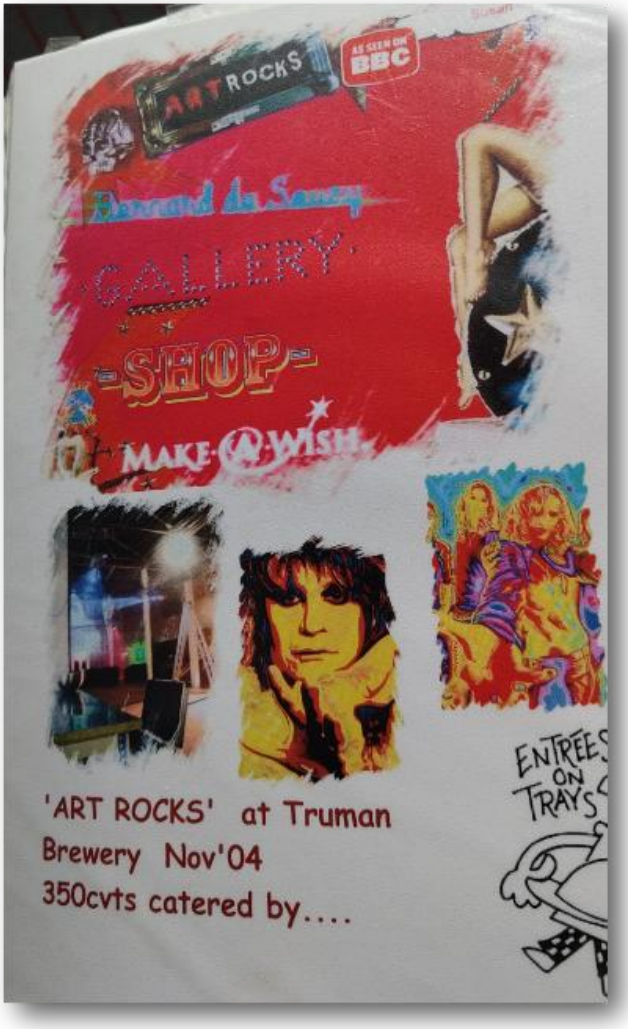
⭐ Collectors, Comics, and Culinary Curiosity

Ironically, collecting seems to be something of a national pastime. ("so, it's not just me Lynn!") When we catered for a Cartoon and Comic Fair, we were completely in awe of the sheer fervour of the collectors and exhibitors. Every table was piled high with treasures — vintage comics, rare prints, and lovingly preserved memorabilia — and the enthusiasm was infectious. It made my own menu-collecting habit look positively restrained. There's something universal about the thrill of finding, keeping, and cherishing the things that tell stories — whether they're menus, comic books, or memories from a lifetime in catering.

⭐ Art Rocks at the Truman Brewery

The Truman Brewery in Brick Lane had a long and storied past, but by the time we arrived it had reinvented itself as a hub for street food, clothing boutiques, and creative events. We often catered there back when it was still possible to park nearby — a luxury that now feels almost mythical.

Our ritual was always the same: a stop at The Original Bagel Bakery for salt beef on rye and smoked salmon bagels, followed by a slice of their famous cheesecake and a cuppa. Only then were we ready to face the day.



This particular event was a massive rock-style art gallery presentation and sale, featuring works in the spirit of Andy Warhol — bold, brash, and utterly fascinating. The crowd was a mix of artists, collectors, and curious onlookers, all buzzing with creative energy. It was one of those days where catering felt less like a job and more like being part of a living artwork — feeding the art world while standing right in the middle of it.

⭐ The Sloping Lawn Saga

A marquee always sounds simple — until you start adding up the details. I quoted for a function, the menu was agreed, and then, as house space proved limited, a marquee was suggested. Naturally, this turned the modest gathering into something rather grander — and pricier. By the time chairs, tables, delivery, and collection were added, the poor host was visibly perspiring.

I mentioned, as casually as possible, that flooring was extra. They could choose a wooden floor, carefully packed to ensure it was level, or a more economical matting option. I advised that, since the garden sloped, the wooden floor would be safer. Prices determined the final choice and the matting was instantly chosen.

Come the day, everything looked splendid — until a sudden scream erupted from the side of the marquee. A large gentleman had tipped his chair back mid-joke and vanished behind the table. Several of us rushed to help, but the chair refused to stay upright. Then we realised why — the guest was laughing so hard that the chair was literally bouncing. Once righted, he continued laughing, completely unhurt and delighted by the spectacle. And I, for one, was profoundly relieved.

It could have been a disaster — instead, it became one of those legendary moments that remind you why catering is never dull

And Through It All…

…Through rooftops, graveyards, drag queens, melted trestles, terrified business partners, and clients who believed the laws of physics were optional, one thing remained true:

I loved it.

Every chaotic, exhausting, hilarious minute

What I Learned While Carrying Forty Hot Plates

After fifty years in catering, I can confidently say I've seen everything. Although knowing my luck, the moment this book goes to print, someone will phone asking:

"Ralph, could you just pop round and do a quick buffet for 200 on a rooftop with no lift, no power, and a tortoise with romantic intentions?"

And the worst part is… **I'd probably say yes.**

Catering has taught me patience, diplomacy, and how to sprint while carrying forty hot plates without swearing in front of a bishop. It has taught me that people are unpredictable, kitchens are temperamental, and trestle tables have a melting point no one warns you about.

But the biggest lesson — the one Lynn reminds me of whenever I'm elbow-deep in pastry or panic — is this:

Life, like a buffet, rarely goes to plan. And that's exactly what makes it delicious.

And if you can laugh while the trestle table collapses, the BBQ melts, the electrics blow, Jo freezes at The Farmer's Market, the bride smacks the groom twice before the starter, and the host in St John's Wood is "otherwise engaged"……you'll be

absolutely fine.

So here’s to the chaos, the characters, the cock-ups, and the countless cups of tea that never tasted quite as good as the first one you were dying for.

If you’ve enjoyed reading this half as much as I’ve enjoyed surviving it, then we’ve both done rather well

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About the Author

(The Man Who Fed Half of London — Mostly on Purpose)

Ralph spent fifty years in the hospitality and catering world, beginning his career in hotel kitchens before moving into pub management and eventually launching his own catering company. Over the decades he fed thousands of people in every imaginable setting — rooftops, riverboats, penthouses, graveyards, film sets, and the occasional street party that probably shouldn’t have happened.

In the later chapters of his culinary life, he somehow became a development producer for a major ice-cream company, ran product-trial street markets, opened his own three delicatessen shops in North London, created a deli-diner after a research trip to the USA, and even brought a new soft drink — Sass — to market. (There may well be another book hiding in that sentence.)

Known for staying calm when everyone else was on fire, for dry humour in the face of chaos, and for an uncanny ability to conjure a three-course meal out of thin air, Ralph built a reputation for reliability in an industry where predictability is a rumour.

His stories — collected, polished, and lovingly retold in this book — reflect a lifetime of camaraderie, calamity, and culinary creativity.

He now lives in London, where he enjoys writing, reminiscing, and — at long last — **not** carrying gas cylinders up twelve flights of stairs

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BACK COVER

From hotel-school mayhem to rooftop BBQs that melted the furniture, this is the true story of Ralph — a man who spent over fifty years feeding the British public while wondering why on earth he agreed to any of it.

Along the way he encountered drunken brides, exploding kitchens, naked men in sinks, drag queens in glass heels, film crews in graveyards, and the occasional member of royalty sipping something he definitely didn’t order.

Revealed on the Back Cover!
Catering Chaos –
A Lifetime Served Hot!
Hotel School Mayhem!
Rooftop BBQ Disaster!
Serving Royalty & Drag Queens!
Film gems in the Graveyard!
ACTION!
SASS SASS SASS SASS SASS SASS
From exploding kitchens to naked men in sinks – Ralph’s true tales of catering calamity and charm!